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ISSUE TWO JANUARY 2007

PANTECHNICON

HORROR + SCIENCE FICTION + FANTASY

FIVE BRAND NEW
STORIES BY:

JOSHUA RAINBIRD
MATTHEW S. CARROLL
NEIL BURLINGTON
JOE COTTLE
SEAN PARKER

THE CONCLUSION TO
THE HIGHLY ACCLAIMED:
TIN LITTER

AND THE SECOND PART
TO OUR FANTASY EPIC:
LONDON CALLING

STEPHEN GALLAGHER

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE AWARD WINNING
WRITER, PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR

PANTECHNICON

Issue 2 | January 2007



Stephen Gallagher speaks to Pantechicon, page 41

After a small delay, here we are again with Issue Two of Pantechicon! Inside you'll find seven brand-new stories, an interview with Stephen Gallagher, and extracts from two books kindly donated to us by Orbit Books.

To cope with all the work we've gone and hired some assistants. Their job is to make us tea, check submissions for typos, and go to Tesco when we run out of milk. Welcome aboard, then, to Rhys Elliott and Jon Cooper, our new Assistant Editors!

If you like what you read, join us in the Forums, Friend us on MySpace, or join our LiveJournal community.

It was nice knowing you, 2006. Now let's see what 2007 has in store!

Andy Frankham-Allen & Trudi Topham, January 2007

Editors: Andy Frankham-Allen & Trudi Topham

Assistant Editors: Jonathan Cooper & Rhys Elliott

Cover: Luke Spillane

Website: Trudi Topham

Portable Document File: Andy Frankham-Allen

Contributors: Neil Burlington; Caroline Callaghan; Matthew S. Carroll; Jon Cooper; Joe Cottle; Sean Parker; Joshua Rainbird; Trudi Topham

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VISIONS

By Neil Burlington

An artist paints his visions and attracts the attentions of a benefactor who promises to make him richer than he could imagine.

'Look. I can't tell you that something isn't there if it is. And I can't tell you something is there if it isn't.'

Stew looked at Ian Nether as if the skinny little fellow in the tattered green t-shirt, sitting on the yellow nylon chair in their apartment family room, was trying to start a game. If he was, it was a game that Stew York didn't intend to lose.

'I'm not having this argument again. There's nothing there. You know it. I know it. You're talking about negation, after all - the Jean Paul Sartre concept that when something fails to appear when you expect it will be there, that makes the absence of it a fact. It makes it a reality of absence because of your expectation of a presence. Only you're talking about it in the reverse sense. And only you can see it. Well... maybe only you and a few other people who've had the misfortune of falling several stories down onto the grass, and having lived to tell about it - suffering only temporary unconsciousness and minor injuries.' As soon as he said it, Stew felt bad. But it was the truth, just the same. It was a valid point. And it wasn't like Ian had ever talked like this before the accident. He hadn't talked like this before the night eleven years ago when he'd gotten sloppy drunk and slipped, falling ass over tea-kettle in the middle of an extremely ill-advised game of hacky-sack, from his bare-footed place on their rain-soaked balcony. From that point on, his painter friend, Ian Nether, had been having visions.

'I see it,' Ian continued. 'I see them. I don't care if you still don't believe me after all this time.' His tone softened. 'I know you don't. No one does. I'm telling you about the most recent ones only because it's something I can't *not* say, and not be lying about it. And I hope you know that by now. I wouldn't lie to you. There is... another half to the world. There's a whole other side of everything that I didn't see before the accident. I couldn't see it. And now I can't... *not* see it. For all the discomfort that I feel in not being able to obviously share this with anyone else, or so it would seem, it *is* real, Stew. The place I see, the other half, is a wondrous and magical place. It's a continuance of what you see here, yet it is brighter, and faster, and boldly-made and luminously magnificent. And,' Ian puffed distractedly at his fading cigarette, 'I don't think I'll ever stop painting it. No matter what anyone says. No matter what you say. You see... it is real, Stew. I'm so positive of it. You'll see it, if you really look for it. Just look into that canvas and ask yourself if the beauty and the structure there accords with truth.'

'So...' Stew lifted his thin hands and held one higher than the other. 'Explain it to me then, one last time. Simple - so I can see it.'

'All right,' Ian said, patiently. 'One last time.' He pointed to the window at the far end of the living room in which they stood. 'It doesn't happen all of the time. It does happen outside sometimes, and I have to take it easy.'

'I know all of this.'

'Of course you do,' Ian said, waving Stew's comment away. 'What you don't know... because I never told you... is what specifically happens when I have these visions. The room becomes divided in half, literally. The left side of the room looks like it does to you... normal. The other side is the same in a way, only it's based in a different and heightened kind of reality that's brighter, like I said, and... faster. So the objects and the people and everything that isn't inanimate is moving faster on one

side of the room. These things seem more, fiery- that's the closest description. Just thinking about it makes me a little dizzy. Everything on the other side is taller- people, buildings, all of it. And everything there is more elaborate, more decorated. But it's all balanced. Like things are balanced within themselves here, for symmetry. And the two sides of the room are seamed down the middle and even though things are moving at different paces and in different scales it all adjusts to a balanced perspective from my point of view. That's it. The rest is just minor details. That's what I see, in my visions. It's what's there in my paintings. Only I'm not sure if I'm capturing the motion and the movement in the other side in the exact fashion in which I see it. I almost wish that I could film it, not just paint it as still pictures. Only, I can't.' He tapped the side of his head. 'Because it's only in here.' He looked down at their faded beige carpet, momentarily saddened. "All in here," he said softly.

Stew discreetly turned his gaze away. If Ian was deluded, he was sincere. If it was some sort of brain-damage it hadn't shown up in his CAT scans. The whole thing was a mystery. And Stew wasn't sure if his artistic friend's condition was a creative blessing or a malediction.

He looked at the latest of Ian's creations. He felt an odd sense that if the scene shown on the canvas was not real in some way it was at least a base for a reality that he could believe... if he could actually see it. It was fantastic, but there were elements of the familiar and even the mundane within it that made it seem plausible. The content of the painting was a great flaming spire of green and canary yellow surrounded at the base by rose and cream swirled parasols held up by lank blue figures. It was a scene from some strange new place, decidedly. But in some way it recalled everyday scenes of his familiars on the night darkened streets downtown, standing in the rain beneath brilliant neon signs. Ian smiled curiously at Stew's inventive slant on such everyday subject-matter. He knew that if pressed to do so he could not create such a skew on his own experience of the world, in any medium. Stew gave a shrug of acceptance. Such were his limitations. His primary skills; being a competent book-keeper and disciplined athlete did not include artistry of any sort. He'd not allowed time for the eccentric parts of himself to take on such fullness and dimension. He looked down at Ian's brush and paints, and gave serious thought to one day having Ian give him a few lessons.

'What about the dealer?' Stew scratched the side of his head and turned his gaze from the painting. The image Ian had shown on the canvas was so complete, surreal and inviting that it remained with Stew even after he looked away from it.

Ian pursed his lips. He rubbed his left hand in little counter-clockwise circles on the table before him. He continued looking down at the table and the motion of his own hand.

'I'm not sure. He said he would call back later tonight. Or by tomorrow at the latest. He said that he liked the work. Though I'm not sure what he thought exactly. But he did say he'd call. That's enough, for now. He even suggested a name for a possible showing: The Secret World.'

Ian stopped his hand mid-circling. He looked up with small bent frown on his lips. 'It's not my favourite title. But it shows he's thinking about me. He said that I get final say on the title for the show, if I actually do get one.'

Stew nodded as he turned and closed the window. It was starting to rain again.

'Well... that's what matters, isn't it?'

Ian nodded.

'It's one of the things.'

The next morning Ian was walked down the street, going to get some brown bread, milk and butter from the convenience store on the corner. He would do a full shop later.

And it happened.

His visual world, split into two parts.

The mundane and ordinary environment of the street, the people on the muted white and greyed sidewalk, the cars, the patchy grass and the islets of trees in the square ahead and all the

restaurants and shops with chipped paint divided to one side of his sight. They drifted to the left. The drift slowly came to a stop at that side, and seamed at the middle of his vision.

On the right and scrolling in, the second half of the world appeared.

The great brightness and the soaring structures made of spiralling construction that were flared out with whipped cone shapes - as Ian thought of them - had the kind of decoration that could be found on an elaborate birthday cake. The details of the structures glowed red from a fire burning far below them. This scene drew across and up and fell back on the right side of his sight, putting the height of these immense buildings into perspective with those on the dimmer, left side of the world: those of the real world.

Ian stopped, momentarily disoriented.

He watched it all for a moment, adjusting to it.

When he was comfortable enough with the adjustment of his pace and his sense of place within the divided world he saw before him, he continued down the walk.

His gate was a little uneven at first, as was usual during these events.

He got a few odd looks, and soon enough he was walking normally again.

Ian continued despite his condition. The convenience store was only a little way away, after all.

The constant division of the visual world stayed with him as he walked on.

Ian returned home, having said nothing to anyone about the second world that continuously played out in front of him, on one side of his vision. He had never spoken of it to anyone except Stew. And he'd only told Stew about it in private.

Ian brought his goods up to the apartment and put them away - all the while still witnessing the events of another home - and other persons who appeared to be made entirely out of blue flame. They had golden and fiery fingertips and waves of energy seemed to drain down and away from them and disappear into the floor as they moved. These people seemed to be simply carrying on with their daily lives on the other side. They were resting, occasionally eating small columns of puffy pink and orange flame - and smaller figures composed of flashing crimson seemed to play at a game of pursuit in the interior of a cavernous house. The house itself seemed to be constructed with ribbed walls of sparkling stuff that looked like ice and diamonds, with a flooring of midnight black.

Ian watched them intently, as if from some short distance away. They were soundless and scentless and they could not be touched. But they were there, somehow seen by him. They were revealed to him - post-trauma - by some uncertain means. He was sure of it. He was not simply imagining this. Despite the fact that he was a technically proficient painter, he just wasn't this imaginative. And he'd never done hard drugs.

When he was finished putting away the food, Ian walked over to his stock of blank canvases. He lifted a fresh one from the floor and placed it on the easel. Once more he started to take it all down.

Ian had many such canvases of domestic life on the other side of what the eye in his mind could see. The dealer, Lionel Crax, had liked these scenes the best. Crax had spent the most time with these on his first visit with Ian.

Yet Crax had frowned in distaste at the scenes of life on the other side city that Ian had painted in the open air. And Crax was not the only one to be confronted by these images. Those who had passed Ian by on the left side world - the real world, had been somewhat confused and even displeased by Ian's interpretations of the sights in their town. These passers-by had been discontented by Ian's open-air paintings, which he created downtown where anyone could see them.

Ian hadn't bothered trying to explain the content of the works to them. He'd simply remained silent and only nodded when someone would incorrectly say for the benefit of their friends or family, that the works were Impressionist, or Abstract.

They were neither.

They were, in fact, as close to photo-real as Ian could make them. Which was very close, indeed.

The next day-

Lionel Crax called Ian and left a message on his machine.

When Ian opened his eyes from dreaming at eleven-thirty in the morning, the red light on his night stand answering machine was blinking. He rolled over and pressed the play button.

'Ian, this is Lionel,' a slightly hollow voice said, 'I've had a chance to talk with some people. They want to put on your work. There are some... conditions attached to this. Please call me at your earliest opportunity.'

Ian pushed off the covers.

This was very good news.

Lionel Crax, was connected. Ian had only met Crax by chance, when Crax had made a stop-over in their little town of Braille to visit relatives. Crax had spotted Ian's work as the dealer had come down the walk on his way to the little convenience store on the corner, to purchase some aspirin for what he'd later called - The Mother of All Headaches. Ian had been doing some of his open air work, and Crax had spotted it, and come over to take a closer look. That's where things had begun between them.

Crax was big city.

Crax had promised Ian that he could get him somewhere. He'd confided in Ian that his artwork, due to its style and content, might be very valuable.

The thought of making a few dollars from his work was inviting to Ian, but what cemented his relationship of artist and dealer with Crax was the idea, of exposure.

Listening to the message, one more time, Ian felt lighter as he got out of bed.

Today was a good day, thanks to Lionel Crax.

And what did he mean by conditions?

Later that afternoon, Ian was on the phone with Crax.

He'd hesitated to call.

Nothing could be wrong until he began to ask questions.

'I understand.' Ian said in response to Lionel's explanation of what he was dealing with on his end.

'Yes,' Lionel continued, 'he's a private collector. His name is Antony Giovanni. He's a fashion mogul. He keeps a house here for when he's across the pond. He wants to put together a showing of new talent in his home. It's a massive estate out in the country. It's really beautiful. It has gorgeous lighting inside through one of those great big squared-off skylights in a round, uh, room. Though that hardly does it justice. It's an exceptional opportunity. I'd take it if I were you.'

Ian considered Lionel's proposal in silence, and answered carefully.

'There's going to be... how many people there?'

Lionel cleared his throat. 'Five. There'll be five people there. All of them are very high-paying patrons of the arts. Aficionados All of them are very knowledgeable with regard to art. This is almost unprecedented. This chance for you, Ian, is golden. Very few people get this kind of showing; out of the box, as it were.'

Ian frowned softly. This offer was in several ways more and less than he'd hoped for. It was a place to begin to have his work seen by those who might understand them, if nothing else. He was fairly certain Lionel was hyping the potential for sales, but who knew, maybe they would actually buy

one or two of the paintings. And those sales might just pay a few bills that the welfare cheques and the odd jobs were barely covering.

‘All right. We’ll show.’

Lionel’s warm tone of response contained his smile. ‘That’s a good decision, Ian. Very good. If you get lucky, and the right person likes your work, you could leave that house a much richer man.’

‘All right. That’s not really what I’m going for, though. Not primarily. Although it would be nice not to have to scrape for awhile. So, how many pieces do I need to bring?’

Lionel cleared his throat again. Perhaps he was sick. ‘All of them. Let me worry about getting them there. It’s not difficult. Just have the canvasses ready for pick-up.’

Ian’s eyes widened.

‘All of them? Really? That’s... well, let’s see, that’s about three-hundred and fifty paintings, all told.’

‘It’s a big house,’ Lionel offered, flatly.

‘I see.’

‘Okay?’

‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

‘Good. The suggested name for the showing is Reconnaissance.

For a moment the air was silent on Ian’s end.

Then he answered; a bit puzzled and offended.

‘Suggested name? I thought I would get to give the name.’

‘Oh, yes. You can.’ Lionel’s tone was calm, and even and guiding. ‘It was just a suggestion, by Giovanni himself. If you didn’t already have one. He’s very interested in the idea of other realities; the aesthetics of them, that kind of thing. He explained to me that he meant it as in- to look into another place of wonder and to be unseen. That sort of thing.’

‘Right. Well, I did have a title in mind. I was thinking of calling it, and this came to me in a dream but it just feels right; *Visions of New Babylon – The Underpinning Truth*.’

There was a moment of silence, this time on Lionel’s side of the line.

Lionel’s voice returned. Still calm, but more controlled.

‘All right. Okay. Really?’ Lionel cleared his throat and continued. ‘Are you a religious person, Ian? By any chance? Is that where you got that... you’ll excuse me for saying so, but... somewhat lumbering title?’

Ian’s frown deepened.

‘No. I told you, it came to me in a dream. The idea was that if I ever got a real showing for this work, I would call it that; *Visions of New Babylon*.’

‘... *The Underpinning Truth*,’ Lionel completed, flatter than before. ‘Well... it’s your work. It might not create the quality we’re looking for here, being so burdensome a title... but it is your work, isn’t it?’

‘All right,’ Ian’s frown again softened, and slowly faded.

‘We’re agreed then.’

‘Yes. I guess we are.’

‘Good. I’ll make the arrangements, and I’ll tell you when everything is getting under way.’

The day of the show, Ian’s excitement was palpable. He tried not to show it and he felt that he must be failing. All of the work of shipping had gone so smoothly. Lionel Crax had been of great assistance with the company he’d contracted to do the job, at no cost to Ian.

On their arrival at the manor, Antony Giovannni stood at the large and open front doors. As he approached the open doors Ian could see that a long green and grey hall led from the marbled foyer into the marbled interior of the manor. He wasn’t smiling and his expression was not neutral. He

wasn't really at ease; neither did he seem displeased. The enigmatic quality of the look on his countenance recalled in Ian's mind the Mona Lisa, with a darker bent.

He was a tall man; standing close to seven feet in height.

There was something about him that seemed very nearly ethereal, yet Ian could not identify in what way precisely. He was very handsome and dark, with thick glossy hair curled with a striking quality and play down to his neck. He was in fact so handsome; ideally so, that it would have been difficult for Ian to describe him if asked. He could only have said that Antony was like a template of perfect design that defines everything around it as equal to, or less than, what is ascribed through it.

'I welcome you,' Antony paused as if searching for the right words, then continued, 'in this space... My home.'

His suit was impeccable, even if his facility with the English language wasn't.

Soon after their arrival, the showing began.

Ian's paintings adorned every wall in the manor. A few special larger pieces were even mounted on bronze posts fastened to the hands of sumptuous bronze nudes.

Collectively the paintings were a vision; a vision that was almost complete, of another world. That vision had not yet been decoded, yet Ian secretly hoped that one of the patrons would comprehend the root of what he himself had seen in creating it, and perhaps even explain the motivation behind his need to document it in more lucid terms than Ian had ever been able to.

The land shown in many still scenes on the canvases was a heightened reality. To Ian all of the scenes, brought together like this, began to yield a coherent view of this reality. It seemed to him as if, in strolling past his own work now spread out and ordered by Crax, he walked through a nearly complete and not altogether alien landscape. .

A jewel of a land.

Of beauty.

And of promise.

Lionel discreetly consulted with Antony then hung back, gazing over the works.

The four other awaited guests entered through the open front doors without announcement. Ian saw them from a distance in the round beneath the sky light. They were not as he had expected they would be.

They were short with waxy dull complexions, bitter and bright raven dark eyes and sharp angular features. Even at a distance Ian could see that shadows clung to them and in their advancement they drew dimness and gloomy atmosphere in their wake. In their energetic and forceful forward march they moved with a synchronic hobble, weaving and bobbling from side to side as they progressed, four-squared, toward Antony. As they passed him by they gave a curt and unified nod.

Antony watched them go by in silence. He smiled, but just a little. He stepped back and nodded for his uniformed house staff to shut the doors of the manor. Ian took a step forward as the four small people entered the round. He nodded. The foremost of them had a sorely bent back, wore a dusty charcoal suit, and was afflicted with a painful looking mottled grey lump on his nose. The man returned the nod.

'The artist? He posed this question, harshly.

Ian nodded. 'Yes. Pleased to meet you.'

The man with the winding and greasy hairs running every which way in his little beard smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. He nodded again, abruptly.

Ian tried to suppress a sense of uneasiness at the intense look in dwarfish mans' eyes, and failed.

The others said nothing at all. One of them was a woman, Ian guessed. They were all so similar and they walked so closely together that it was hard to discern much about them other than that they sadly were not particularly blessed, in a physical sense. To Ian's mind, they were at first eerily quiet. They turned, almost as one from him and headed toward the nearest painting.

The sign reading '*Visions of New Babylon – The UnderPinning Truth*', was the first thing to catch their attention. The nearest one on the left reached out with a quick grasp, and took it down. He handled it somewhat clumsily. He frowned, and it slipped from his hands and clattered down onto the marble. One of the others picked it up and re-hung it, crookedly.

Ian frowned. He walked over to the engraved sign as they started to take in the works, mumbling something to one another that was almost impossible to decipher. As he straightened the sign, Ian found Antony at his shoulder.

'It is not English that they speak. That is, they speak... but a *dash* of it. They do not speak my language, either.'

Ian nodded, which seemed the polite thing to do.

Antony smiled. It was a grim kind of smile.

All that afternoon Ian watched as the dwarfish grey, ugly aficionados took in the paintings. Sometimes they would gesture to one another with frenetic energy, seemingly furious about something they'd observed in one of the paintings. They hissed at Antony as they passed him.

Ian stood beside Lionel, watching them.

'They're quite unusual.' Lionel smiled a strangely disquieting smile. 'You might say... they're from out of town.' His smile twisted at the edges, as if he thought what he'd said was terribly insightful and funny.

Ian simply nodded. 'All right. Do you think they'll be interested in any of the paintings? Really?'

Lionel shrugged. His smile faded. 'Quite possibly.'

This continued on into the night. At the conclusion of the viewing and the discussing and the quarrelling between the aficionados about the content of many of the paintings - quarrelling as if personally outraged or mortified by the content of them, they finally returned to the exact spot where they'd begun their tour.

The unlikely diminutive potential patron and devotee of the arts at the front of the group on the right grabbed Antony by his suit-coat and dragged him down until they were face to face. Within Ian's hearing and only a few paces from where the artist reposed upon an eighteenth century velvet upholster chair beside Lionel who was similarly reposed, the little man eagerly whispered something dark and sinister sounding into Antony's ear

As Ian witnessed the communication he casually sipped a Tom Collins provided to him by the staff. Lionel partook of a neat whisky, also provided by the quiet and efficient staff. Ian was visibly fatigued by the day long wait during the evaluation of his work. Lionel appeared as fresh as he had that morning.

Seeing and overhearing a part of the conversation between Antony and the diminutive devotee, Ian leaned over to Lionel and asked, 'Do you think they might have reached a decision?'

Lionel smiled, stretched and stood.

'I'll go ask them,' he answered with a sharp, friendly smile.

Lionel walked over to where Antony stood. When he reached him the conversation between the undersized aficionado and guest ended and Antony looked down at Lionel with an expression that bordered on contempt. Yet he smiled, placidly. The little person did not bother to meet Lionel's gaze.

Antony softly whispered something into Ian's ear. At this whisper Lionel's face, lit up. He stepped back from Antony.

'Are you sure?'

Antony nodded so slightly it was barely a nod at all.

'Very well then. Very well indeed.'

Lionel shook Antony's hand, vigorously. The audience of the four shadowy and gloomy connoisseurs glanced at the gesture and hissed, but said nothing. Lionel turned from Antony, and walked back in Ian's direction- making direct eye contact with Ian. Lionel's enlivened smile was as wide as the moon and as warm as fresh-baked apple pie.

When he reached Ian, he reached out with both hands and gripped Ian by his shoulders. His hold was surprisingly strong.

'They want it, Ian. Yes. You fortunate, talented and lucky soul. They want it all. Do you understand? They want to buy every piece and they are willing to pay the asking price for each. This is very rare... very rare,' Lionel repeated softly, his smile still large and bright.' To Ian's ears there seemed something strained and unnatural in Lionel's tone; something forced, that undercut his words. But Ian suppressed his instinctive detection of this strangeness, and tried to accept Crax and his words, at face value.

'Really?'

Lionel stepped closer. 'You heard me. Recall that I told you that you might walk out of here a much richer man. That wasn't hard to promise when I first spoke of it, considering you had practically nothing at the time. But now, things are different. You stand to make... well, let's not dwell on figures here. It's a little unpleasant to do so, don't you think? Suffice to say you will never want for funds again, my artistic friend. Not anytime soon, at any rate. More than that, they love the work. They absolutely adore it. I am told that it reminds them of home. Isn't that wonderful?'

Ian's eyes widened. There was a fierceness in Lionel's congratulations that put him further on edge. There was even a hint, of desperation. But the news was apparently so good, that Ian offered more of himself, just the same.

'That's great Lionel. Really, terrific.' He paused, considering the new reality he was about to enter. A new future as a recognized and compensated artist. It was truly delightful; wasn't it? 'Is there anything else? Would they like to see more work? I'm still having the visions. I can still make more paintings for them.'

At these words, Lionel's smile and his energetic congratulating fell cold.

Ian continued without attending this alteration, drawn inward to his own speculations about his new life. He even spoke his hopes aloud.

'I wish Stew could be here to see this. I didn't really think it would amount to all that much. I would have invited him.' Without looking at Lionel, Ian got up and started walking in the direction of the deep pocketed authoritative patrons who were about to change his life.

'There is one other thing...' Lionel's voice came from behind him. Though it was still recognizable as Lionel's, the tone was strange and high and taught, even tremulous. 'One more thing, for you to provide. For the assessment of your work is complete, and though it has been deemed accurate, cleanly made and even beautiful, it has also been declared- invasive. Oh, you will be a richer man; for that I have commend you- and yet, I am more regretful than you can know, for what must necessarily come next. Ian; my place by grave and rash past bargaining is subservience to dark and demonic powers... I wish you could not know. I too am a richer man than once I was; more handsome, taller, more eloquent, more... fortunate. But there is always a bill for services rendered.... isn't there? However we may pay it. Judgement is passed. I had hoped it would not turn against you. But it has. Now your sentence must be carried out.'

Ian turned.

He saw the flash of white shining from a blade in motion, travelling in a savage downward arc.

And Ian screamed.

He screamed as the sharp blade of the gold-handed dagger Lionel had produced from within his suit-coat pierced his left eye.

Ian stumbled, and staggered back.

Screaming.

His shrill and sudden screams, echoed in the round.

Dark laughter came from somewhere behind him. In half of his eye-sight Ian saw Lionel lunge once more, and drive the blooded tip of the dagger into his remaining eye.

Ian fell back.

Blind.

Bleeding.

Screaming, even louder now, more desperately.

And he tumbled down, onto the cold marble floor.

Lionel's voice and the dark chuckling of the aficionados and the higher laughter of Antony continued. It echoed all about him in the dark.

'Yes. There is one other thing for you to provide, Ian. My newly wealthy artist, and friend. Yes, you will leave here with your riches- and you have only my word to assure of this, but,' and Lionel stepped forward onto Ian's left hand, crunching the bones beneath his heel. Ian shrieked out, helpless in the cold black. Lionel stepped to Ian's other hand that twisted on the floor, and did the same again. 'You will never, ever, paint these visions any more.' Lionel lowered himself to a knee and slipped the blade of the dagger expertly into Ian's throat, muting him, drawing it back with only a trickle of blood. 'Moreover, you will never speak of nor be capable to depict that which you have so freely seen. You do understand it, at some level, don't you? Can't you feel it? Ian? Artist? That which you have seen is forbidden. That which you have depicted in your work, the coming realm of Illusion and Conquest, that awaits this world's time to suffer it...'

Ian's choking and now silenced screams in the dark, his broken hands flopping and turning at his sides as he rolled in agony, his eyes bleeding out humour... all of it was fine entertainment to the aficionados; those dark and hideous and expert censors. It was a source of great glee to them. Ian's world closed in almost every aspect, and in his misery the disconnection of his perspective from the scene reduced him to comprehensive darkness and utter impotence to further influence his fate.

Antony's eyes now contained all that could be seen. He looked down to Ian without expression. His attentive gaze contained neither hatred nor pity, only terrible duty. He called to the staff.

'Begin, the destruction... the works, all of them... into the fire.'

Antony nodded to Lionel. Lionel handed him the dagger and Antony held it out to one of the staff for disposal in the furnace. Antony watched as Lionel grabbed Ian by the collar and dragged him, still mutely screaming, to his feet. This time Antony spoke his English a little more clearly. He spoke with a practiced clip and he spoke words that he had said several times before.

'The Mantics,' Antony spoke in tones touched with disappointment. 'The dreamers and prophets of what is to come. They will never learn. For even when they claim they do not know what they show in their works, they do. In ways they may not realise, until it is too late for them, they *do* know. What they show must never be shown, to humanity. The misleading gifts of our Master. His paradise for this world. This man has seen it. Somehow he has seen it. Perhaps he has seen it by pain. Possibly he has seen it by sustained concentration, without distraction. Yes. He has seen it. The promise of New Babylon that will lead mankind by temptations of greatness and complete independence from any God into ruin... Into enslavement to our Lord. No anticipation, no contemplation of this preceding its arrival can be allowed. Contemplation may lead to doubt that this New Babylon predicated upon self love and gain is all that it promises of beauty and human elevation

and ecstasy, with nothing to be sacrificed, in exchange. That cannot be, lest they turn away to another source of affirmation beyond blind obedience to the fulfilment of material and... other needs.'

Antony drew in close. Ian could feel his hot breath against his neck as he softly, almost tenderly spoke into his right ear.

'Learn to keep this secret, my friend. For its visitation with you has been but a curse and a mistake from angels. You are mangled and you will live on as a symbol of our retribution. You will be an example to others; other prophets who will see you and understand the price of their works. They will understand the price of sharing *visions*. Learn to keep what you have seen secret and to yourself, lest the world believe you... that they should be visited too soon, by the furies of Hell, and our Master. Believe me, Ian Nether; believe in me. We will see New Babylon before that, here on this Earth.' Antony chuckled softly. 'Fear not. And you will warn and inform no one of its peril.'

He nodded to Lionel Crax.

'Make sure he gets... his money. Mend him, in the infirmary... and get him out of my house.'

Lionel nodded and with Ian in his clutches, he did as he was told.

TIN LITTER, part two

By Jon Cooper

The second half of Jon Cooper's Tin Litter, which began in Issue One. If you missed Part One, download Issue One from our [Back Issues](#) section.

I was walking to the park with Mother and I absent-mindedly started to strum the hand she wasn't holding against the dirty black railings on my left. I'd only been doing it for a couple of seconds when she reached down and slapped my fingers away.

'Stop that!' she snapped. 'It's naughty.'

Before we reached the park with the swings and the big tube slide I saw a man open his boot on the side of the road, and two dogs slithered out the back of his car like a pair of wet snakes. Then the man put them on leads and led them away, and I saw they were the same height as me, which is weird, considering I'm a fully grown man.

Later on, while I was playing, I saw an older boy, or perhaps it was a bloke with a beard, and as he was walked past he was strumming his fingers across the bars just like I did. I stopped and stared, furious at what he was doing. In my angriest voice I yelled at him; 'Stop that! It's naughty!' But he didn't listen and carried on walking, and he strummed the bars right to the end of the fence. Then I saw Mother, who'd seen what I'd done, and she was charging towards me with her open palm raised.

I awoke suddenly. I was sweaty, and not in a pleasant way. For a second I didn't know where I was, but then I recognized the proportions of my room and the darker squares of the posters on the wall where I'd stuck them the night before, and then I remembered.

Mother never let me put posters up. For her, Blu Tack was a ploy of the wallpaper makers, solely existing to knacker your walls and thus perpetuating an endless cycle of DIY. She wouldn't even allow it in the house. But I had a special stash, bought mainly to annoy her and partly to make tiny little sculptures. I was so happy I finally got to use it, although I'd moved on from making little men with it and then squashing them when I got bored. After all, I was making little men of a far better quality now.

I could see the glow of their eyes as my own adjusted to the darkness. I had no idea how many robots I now had under my control. They were everywhere, climbing across the walls or the ceiling, shuffling in and out from under my bed or standing in formation on the desk by my bed, standing guard while I was asleep.

I checked my alarm clock. It was a quarter past four in the morning. The dream about Mother had made me angry. I thought I'd managed to shake off her shackles for good but even here, where I was free to do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted to do it, she wouldn't leave me alone. I was wide awake, so I decided to watch something. If I felt tired later I could always sleep in the afternoon, which I'd discovered was a pleasant way to while away the hours.

'Put a video on,' I said to the robots on my desk. 'Something light-hearted. *Terminator 2*.' They flashed their eyes and moved off, and I lay back on the bed and waited for the film to start. Of course, I'd never have been able to watch something in the early hours at home. That's why I felt so good about this new place.

OK, the place itself was pretty crappy, but having a smaller room, an irritable neighbour and a communal toilet was a small price to pay for freedom. And it wasn't like I was paying anything for the room. Well, not really. I'd never have been able to move out without an army of tiny robots who'd do whatever I told them.

You should have seen the look on Mother's face when I flashed that wad of cash in front of her. Her eyes widened to the size of dinner plates and she licked her lips at the prospect of what that kind of money could buy her at the off license. She went from bribing me to stay with an endless supply of Cheesy Wotsits to accusing me of being a thief and a drug-dealer in a split second.

'I can't understand how you've turned into a juvenile delinquent,' she said, as if I were some sort of gangland boss. 'It's not like you're hanging about with the wrong sort, 'cause you don't have no-one to hang about with anyway, do you, Gregory?'

'Don't have a go at me just because you don't know how to handle your money, Mother,' I said to her, rather drolly, 'besides, of course, handing great chunks of it over the counter at the *Booze-4-Less*. How could I be a thief when I haven't even left the house? I've scrimped and saved for ages for this very day! I hadn't, of course, but I didn't mind lying.

Oh, they were dandy little burglars, were my robots. It started with me just sending them out for money so I could afford my own place - just to the neighbour's houses, in the middle of the night. I daren't have sent them downstairs. I was sure Mother was keeping a very close eye on everything (snack or otherwise) after the infamous Kettle Chip incident of last week. After only a couple of nights they'd managed to nab over £500, more than enough to find myself a suitable new home.

The day of my leaving was predictably tragic. I packed all my stuff into plastic bags (which Mother charged me 50p each for, even though she's got loads of 'em clogging up a drawer in the kitchen) and called a taxi, then began hefting my stuff downstairs to the porch. Mother was on my heels every second (though she didn't offer to help, not once, claiming her hip was being funny on account of the weather), switching between begging me to stay in floods of tears or slapping me and calling me a louse. Two quick honks of a car horn outside informed me that my chariot had arrived, and I unlatched the door, hoping I'd get the slovenly driver to give me a hand with my stuff. As I swung the door open, Mother grabbed by elbow.

'It's not too late, Gregory,' she said, lip a-tremble. 'Don't let your pride get in the way of your Mammy's love. My offer of the Wotsits still stands.'

'It gone beyond Cheesy Wotsits, Mother,' I said, slowly starting to move towards the cab. I felt her fingers lock around my arm for a second before the strength in her faded and her hand slid away. She kicked my bags into the street and slammed the door. I heard the lock click down and then it started to rain.

'How about this weather, eh?' drawled the back of the cabbie's neck as he casually turned left.

'Yes,' I said. 'How about it.' I was sitting on, around, and partially under, a huge nest of carrier bags filled with my possessions, as well as many of the other things Mother had tried to bribe me with when in one of her generous moods. The day before last she had tentatively knocked on the door while I was watching *Dune*, so I put Sting getting stabbed on 'pause' and wandered across to the door. She never bothered barging in nowadays, so I didn't have to worry about the robots milling around the floor. When I opened up she was standing there smiling, and across her arm she carried my father's old army jacket. I'm sure he was never in the army but he had it anyway, a huge, stiff, grey-green greatcoat with shining brass buttons. She offered it to me and I took it, then I closed the door in her face.

I was wearing the coat in the back of the taxi. Only now, on account of the rain, it was twice the weight it normally was and smelt like a wet dog. The plastic bags I was buried in made the whole thing unbearably hot. But underneath the sodden coat I could feel the tickle of the robots crawling across my skin. Some of them stood sentry by the hatch, others just wandered where they pleased. I could even see them moving around the clothes and toys in the bags piled around me. But I wasn't worried. There was no way this ignoramus in the front would notice them. He could barely drive.

‘Did you see that,’ he said, rhetorically, after honking his horn and swearing for a few moments. ‘Bloody cyclists.’

I had to listen to him talking about the football and scratching himself for nearly fifteen minutes. When he dropped me off he didn’t help me unload, and when I rang the doorbell the landlord, a surly Welshman with huge black eyebrows and a pale, fat face, simply grunted and pointed upstairs before going back to the TV that was blaring from his room at the side.

You see, now I am a new man, I have a choice. Now I had my freedom, what was I to do with it? I thought about getting a job. And then I realized it was far easier for my army of slaves to simply steal everything I needed. Entertainment and snack foods were all I really wanted, and so I set my legions onto fulfilling my needs. I started small. Packets of Doritos, ten or twenty quid here and there. I never had the robots steal from my own building, oh no - the surrounding streets were full of these rented places, single rooms side by side and nobody in any of ‘em talking to the next, which was fine by me, seeing as it meant I was left alone and the people that my robots plundered only ever thought they ‘mislaidd’ that fiver.

As *Terminator 2* clicked on there was a sudden presence outside my open window. The corner of a big grey shape suddenly bobbed into view and began to inch its way upwards. A shiny screen emerged, hefted by dozens of robots. Within thirty seconds they’d got my new TV into the room. It was a 48” widescreen plasma with built in 5.1 surround sound, DVD player and internet access. It was a thing of beauty. I knocked Arnie on the head and waited impatiently for the robots to set it up. Nowadays they mill in from everywhere, day or night, and it always amazes me that they never get caught. My slaves were masters of stealth as well as strength, and they were clever enough to only bring in stuff like the tellies and the computers when it was dark.

I’ve got one hell of an entertainment centre now. There was everything - video games, digital TV, the latest super-slick cameraphone-blackberry (which I’ve never actually used). My proudest acquisition, however, must be the Internet. I’d used to beg Mother, literally beg her and my hands and knees, to get a computer but she’d always said no. ‘I know what you’d be getting up to,’ she’d never fail to add after she’d said her final No. Then she’d usually followed it up with some thing like: ‘It was bad enough when your Grandfather went blind.’

But her belittling restrictions were all behind me now. It wasn’t long before the robots found me a state-of-the-art PC. I had them hook it up to the information super-highway and I sped towards a bright new dawn. Then I got a massive virus and they had to steal me another one.

As well as being first-class kleptomaniacs my robots were also expert engineers. They’d constantly tinker and improve on all my gadgets, reusing the bits and pieces salvaged from mangled hard drives and too-small TVs. They’d even managed to plug in the parsnip. It jutted out from the side of my computer, where its little lights glowed more fiercely than ever, until the day it burnt out in a shower of sparks and the robots had to replace it with a swede.

I don’t know what it was that had persuaded me to take the great effort to get up that afternoon, but I did. I never noticed how uncomfortable lying down can be, if you do it for long enough. Anyway, I stood up, and when I glanced out the window I saw that tiny, malicious frame that I thought I’d left behind scooting towards the door of the building.

I didn’t have time to run downstairs and tell Mr Campbell, the landlord, not to open the door to her, and anyway, I wasn’t in a running mood. So I locked my door, sat down, and nervously waited.

I jumped when the doorbell buzzed. I expected to hear Mr Campbell's heavy breathing and low mutters as he got up to let her in... but they never came.

The doorbell sounded again. I hoped, prayed, begged that none of the others living in the house were expecting any visitors or parcels. My robots milled about the room in the same way they always did, oblivious to the danger. Then there came a third ring. Then a fourth. I sat on the bed and trembled, half with anger, half with... I don't know what. Hours seemed to pass.

I crawled back to the window on my hands and knees and raised my head over the sill. As I was wearing my father's old coat I felt like some soldier in an old war film, peeking out over the trench, about to get his brains blown out. But all I saw was the back of her shuffling away, shoulders low and limp and her perm dented from the rain. Once more, the attacker had been repelled. I waited for Mr Campbell to return, in order to demand that on no account should Mother be granted admission to see me. But I never heard him. Annoyed, I waddled downstairs with the intention of leaving him a note and a full (and frank) description of the *persona non grata*. When I got there I found him asleep at the desk, nursing a half-drunk bottle of naval rum, stewing in a cloud of BO. The man was a degenerate, and could not be trusted. Later that night I had the robots sabotage the doorbell.

I felt a sudden gnawing in my belly. Last night's dinner had been a whole twenty-pack bag of assorted crisps and I needed something a little more filling. Though I enjoyed my food a lot, I was never cut out to be cook. Mother didn't even let me into the kitchen until I was twelve, and even then, after she'd warned me of the imminent hazards of gouged eyes, cremated fingers and other assorted mutilations that were only a moment's carelessness away, I was reluctant to go back. My robots couldn't cook, and seeing as I had outgrown Mother's services I usually survived on takeaways. But no takeaway was open at six a.m. Even though the robots were responsible for supplies and their transportation, I'd occasionally deign to wander down to the corner shop by myself. Today looked like one of those days. I plucked a twenty from the pile of banknotes on my desk and taped a plastic bag around my chest-hatch. It spat out a batch of eggs roughly every four hours, but it was still pretty random as to exactly when. I didn't want the numpty who works the till to think I've been shoving the pick n' mix up my top.

I selected four large pork pies from the brightly lit fridge at the back. Nursing them to my almighty bosom I toddled over to the paypoint and dumped them on the counter.

'Hang on,' I said breathlessly to the assistant, 'I'll be back.'

It took me six trips to get everything I needed. I'd only three big bottles of Tizer left so I got a couple more, as well as the usual bundle of crisps. As I passed my money over to the attendant (a long-haired pale kid who flinched in a manner that suggested he was shouted at a lot), he looked at me strangely, then he started to smile.

'Nice piercing,' he said.

'Yes,' I said, as I begrudgingly started to pack my own bags, 'very funny.'

'No, no,' he said, looking panicked. 'Honest. I like it.'

'Do you know what I think? Hmm?' I paused for a moment to make sure he was listening. 'I think you should spend less time making stupid jokes and concentrate on keeping proper hours. I'm an important man. Unique, even. And yet – though it clearly states six a.m. on the door – here I am, waiting outside in the cold and dangerous streets for nearly five minutes before I'm allowed inside. Is that funny? Hmm? Is it?' He opened his mouth to answer but I said, 'No. Don't answer that. It'll only make you look *more* stupid. Piercing indeed.' Then I took my change and left with dignity.

It was while I was in the bathroom, after I'd eaten the pork pies, that I found out what the kid in the store had been talking about.

It was there, clearly, on my cheek. I felt up to make sure it was real, and it was. Solid and undeniable. I wasn't imagining it. The minor cabin fever and few-too-many sci-fi films definitely hadn't got to my head.

There was a little red LED, flashing at two-second intervals, buried in my cheek. A little nest of fine silver wires spread out from around it. I looked down at the robots. They were continuing around the room in their own mysterious way, some with their heads spinning, some looking at me for a moment and moving on. What was I to do? They couldn't speak, they couldn't *tell* me what they were doing to me. They just did whatever they wanted, like they did to the parsnip.

Well, this new facial addition left me with no alternative but to never leave the house again. I'd been lucky with that moron at the shops, but I couldn't risk being as lucky a second time. No-one, absolutely no-one in the outside world must learn of me and my robot brethren. And, thinking about it, if I was to stay incarcerated, then I needn't worry about my little robots and their tinkering with bits of my person. If no-one was going to see me then it really didn't matter what I looked like.

A few days later I was woken up by another terrible dream. In the interim I found new improvements on myself, including some wires running a little way up my left leg and an on/off switch in the middle of my forehead, which I hadn't dare flick to the 'off' position. The surgery was only ever done at night, while I was asleep, and was always painless. In fact, when I awoke from this dream I thought, in my disorientated state, that perhaps I had awoke in the middle of some complicated procedure, and was about to put some precious part of me in jeopardy. But this was not the case.

The dream was another weird one. I was back at home except I didn't have my robots, and I went downstairs to see what Mother was up to... when I reached the bottom of the stairs I looked into the living room and there, sitting in Mother's chairs, was a giant robot sipping a whisky sour. Without looking round it said,

'Where are you going, Gregory, where are you going? Don't forget about the cat.'

'Cat?' I said, 'what cat? You hate cats, you always did.'

'Mew,' said the robot, 'Mew, mew, mew.'

It was at that point I woke up.

'Mew,' said the cat. 'Mew.'

I looked around. The room was in total darkness. But there was definitely a cat in my room.

'Lights,' I said drowsily. Somewhere in the darkness the brief flicker of a robot's eyes flashed as it accepted my orders. A few seconds later it reached the lamp on my bedside table and mounted, as had my first ever robot slave, the switch.

I had to stifle a scream when the light came on. In the middle of the room, on the carpet next to an abandoned Nintendo, was the cat. It had been opened from throat to tail and blood was seeping out onto the floor. The cavity inside it was filled with robots, milling in and out, covered in gore. Some of them walked with wires that were linked up to a greasy car battery, and electric mixer and what appeared to be a large potato. Some of them swarmed around its paws and pinned them to the ground.

'Mew,' said the cat.

I felt ashamed. The number of horror films I've seen, the sheer amount of eviscerations, decapitations, mutilations and general gruesomeness I've witnessed over the years and still I found the sudden and overwhelming urge to be sick. I just about managed to heave my bulk over to the open window before I made more mess on the carpet. I can't believe it – all the spilt guts, ripped-out livers and eye-popping and I was still made ill by the sight of a dead cat. Hadn't I learnt anything from years as a film buff?

Shaking, I took a swig from a nearby bottle of Apple Tango and stared at the butchered pet. What on earth was I supposed to do with a half-dead cat?

I needn't have worried. By the time I woke up in the morning the cat had gone. A circular stain of black remained on the carpet. I still think that sometimes I hear a muffled mew in the night, or sometimes, when I looked into the mish-mash of electronics all around me, I can't quite tell if I'm looking at a shadow or a patch of dusty black fur.

Later on in that day, Mr Campbell knocked on my door. Though I come to loathe both him and his personal habits he at least respected my privacy, and he never once expected to enter my domain.

'Greg?' he said nervously.

'What is it,' I grumbled, putting *The X-Files* on pause.

'Rent.'

Staying, as I did, indoors, I'd pretty much lost track of what day it was. I silently gestured from my bed for a group of robots to slide the banknotes under the door to him, as had become usual.

'Greg,' he said again, as soon as the money had been sucked into the corridor outside. 'I couldn't help but notice a puddle of... illness under your window this morning.'

'Wasn't me,' I said. 'Must have been that bloke in the room on the first floor.'

'Mr Selby? Ain't you heard, boy? He died last week.'

'Really,' I said.

'Oh, yes. Tragic. Electrical accident,' said Campbell, in the same voice he used when he talked about the rugby. 'Police said he tried to plug himself into his microwave, or some such stupidity. Bugger owed me two months back rent, he did.'

'Well, it must have been some passing drunk who vomited on your doorstep. It certainly wasn't me.' I didn't want to continue with this conversation, and decided to change the subject. 'Any sign of that woman?'

'Not as yet, Greg. Not as yet.' And he shuffled off to drink and watch the golf.

The days moved on and I moved less and less. It was barely worth getting up at all any more. The problem was that I was just so bored. It's amazing how many videos you can get through when you're watching them for up to fifteen hours a day. Even the internet had lost much of its appeal now I found moving more difficult. There were a couple of reasons for my lack of motion, neither of which were my fault. The first was my appearance, the second was my weight.

The robots hadn't stopped their tinkering with me, and nowadays it was more unusual to wake up and find my slaves hadn't grafted at least one new bit of electronic jiggery-pokery somewhere on my body, although there was so much now it was difficult to tell what was new and what had been there from the start. There were various wires running from my chest and legs, snaking away to be plugged into something I had absolutely no knowledge about. A large, clear pipe ran from the side of my head to the computer monitor. Circuit boards and big, black humming boxes had been welded on in places, and a whole complex spring-release mechanism, complete with countdown timer and a small hopper to catch the eggs, had been added around the hatch.

Of course, I couldn't go out looking like this. Not that I was ashamed, quite the opposite – I was incredibly proud of the new, improved me, even though I had no idea what the purpose of it all was. But I couldn't have anyone seeing me like this and learning the secret of my success. So it was all the robot's fault, really. Now that I never went down to the shops I was dependant on my attendees for all nourishment, and in order that I should never go hungry they kept a constant vigil and offered sacrifices of chocolate and tortilla chips. To the right side of my mouth three robots would stand, and over their heads they constantly held a king-size Snickers bar. Whenever I felt hungry all I needed to do was lean down and bite off a chunk. On the left stood another line, and here each slave carried a tortilla chip which they would lovingly place between my lips when commanded.

Of course, this diet did have a somewhat negative effect on my overall mass. I had no idea what my actual weight was, but it seemed to me I had increased in size by about one third. I can't accurately judge how chunky my legs had become, owing to the fact it has become increasingly rare that I see them.

The countdown timer on my chest went to zero. It gave a little beep and the hatch spewed out a neat pile of eggs. The robots lined up to carry them, eventually disappearing into a hole in the side of my computer.

There were thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of them now. They never stopped and they never complained, just like slaves ought to do. The walls and ceilings were covered with them. They swarmed like insects over every device and bit of metal, every surface. Well, every surface except the plasma TV screen, which I'd expressly forbade them to cross, even while I was asleep and it wasn't in use. If they'd put even a single, solitary scratch on the glass I'd have had to get myself a brand new one.

They brought me new videos, DVDs and computer games every day, but all of them bored me. I hardly ever found anything worth watching, and even when I did I quickly tired of it. I was desperate for entertainment. I even considered ordering the robots to go out into the night and find me a woman, but after careful consideration I abandoned the idea. Even if my army managed to get me one, I couldn't let her see me; even if she did, I couldn't let her leave.

So I was almost glad when Mother came to visit again. Almost. It was a break in the monotony, at least, but I'm sure it sent my blood pressure sky-high.

It started, as usual, with a godawful banging on my door early in the morning. Seeing as I wasn't been disturbed by anyone other than the monkey-landlord downstairs, and hadn't even seen hide nor hair of another human being for a couple of weeks more, it came as something of a surprise. But not as much as a surprise as hearing that whingy, grating voice again.

'Gregory. Open up. It's your Mother.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Let's stop all this silliness. I've been going out of my head with worrying about you, young man.'

'I'm perfectly fine.'

'Well, not according to Bryn, you're not.'

'Who on Earth is Bryn? And why should he have any insight into my wellbeing?'

'Bryn. Mr Campbell. Your landlord, Gregory.'

'Him? He had strict instructions to keep you out of here. I shall have to have a stern word with him.'

'Well, you can't. He's gone out.'

'Yes, to the off-licence, probably. I thought you too might get along.'

'We did. He's a very nice man. After I'd told him about everything you've put me through he was very understanding.'

'How did you find me? I took great pains to hide myself away so I wouldn't have to put up with your interfering again.'

'I heard you tell the taxi driver when you left.'

'Well, at least all those hours spent on your arse in front of *Poirot* weren't wasted, then.'

'Gregory!'

'I'm not at home any more, Mother. I don't have to mind my Ps and Qs.'

'It took a lot for me to come here today, do you realise that? Mabel was shocked that I was coming at all after the way you'd treated me, and the way you're behaving, I'm starting to agree with her.'

'Fine,' I said. 'Piss off.' After a second I heard the crocodile tears seeping through the door. I checked my e-mails (still nothing) until she'd finished her little performance.

'Oh Gregory,' she sniffed, 'you don't understand. I've been so lonely since you left, you don't know what it's doing to me. I can't sleep at night, I've started to drink... I just want you back, come on, come on home. I'll look after you properly, I promise. You're room's just the way you left it. I'll cook you all your favourite meals, I'll even leave you alone, let you do what you want, if you'll just come back with me. Come on. Come back home with your Mother.'

'No,' I said. 'I'm important now. More important than you'll ever know. Powerful, even.'

'Important?' she screeched suddenly. 'Powerful?' The old Mother had returned, as I knew she would. 'What, you mean important like sitting up all night and watching dirty videos? Or powerful like you never step outside? Oh, Mr Campbell's told me everything, young man. You let me in this minute, I'll sort you out.'

'I'm not letting you in.'

'Have you got a girl in there?' she asked. 'Are you naked?' Considering the only thing I was wearing was the old army coat, she was partially right. It was comfortable, warm, and all I really needed. Besides which, changing clothes was such a chore nowadays, especially after the robots had threaded the cloth with wires.

'Well, seeing as you mention it, I'm not decent, no.'

'Well, it's nothing that I haven't seen before,' she said, and I heard the spine-freezing jingle of keys.

'What are you doing?' I yelled. 'You can't come in here, it's private!'

'Not when you've a landlord, it's not. He's the higher power. And he also lent me his keys. Very sympathetic, he was, after I'd told him what a grasping little arsewipe you are.'

'I'm warning you, Mother. Very seriously. Don't come in here. If you come in here it'll only bring dire consequences upon yourself.'

'Nonsense. It's not like you've...'

From my position on the bed I was powerless to stop her opening the door, and though I'd seen Mother's face contort into disgust many times before, when she looked on my majestic presence she managed to reach new heights. Her hand sprang up to her mouth. Her eyes widened impossibly. Her face lost all colour. She was too frightened even to scream.

She stared at me for a brief moment before bolting, slamming the door behind her. Seconds later I heard the front door bang shut. Well, you've gone and done it now, haven't you, Mother? Deep down, I always knew that her meddlesome prying would be her undoing. And now she'd seen what I had become, what my glorious army of robots had made me, I had no alternative. She's driven me to this. I set my head back down on the pillow in order to get some more sleep. When I woke up I'd have some new instructions for my troops.

'Gregory? Ckkrh. Are you there? Ckkr. This is your Mother.'

It was another dream. Mother was talking to me in my sleep again.

'Chkkr. When's *Doctors* on, Gregory? I want to watch *Doctors*. Ckkrh.'

'Shut up about your TV, Mother,' I moaned, drowsily.

'Don't you tell me- bzzt- to shut up.'

My eyes flicked open. This was no dream.

Yesterday, she had come to see me. And now it looked like she'd settled in for good.

Of course, I knew Mother couldn't be trusted to keep my little secret to herself. It was bad enough when she told her Bridge Club about that time I had pinworms. So she had to be silenced, and, as was only fair, I told my robots to 'take care of Mother'. This, of course, they did. But, as usual, they put their own robot spin on things.

She was there, on my desk, next to the TV. Not all of her, of course. Just the head. It was wedged on the shaft of an old, abandoned standing lamp. Wires ran away from the scraggy tatters of

skin at the bottom of the neck and disappeared into the back of the computer. Two pipes ran from either side of her head – one was a large and clear, the same as the one I had, and the other was thinner and connected to an upturned bottle of gin strapped to the wall just behind her. Her mouth had been replaced by an old radio speaker that crackled with static and her eyes were now two white light bulbs which flashed whenever she spoke.

‘Gregory? I know you’re there, Gregory. Ckkkhr.’

‘Yes, yes, Mother. I’m here.’

‘Cxxkhh. I’m cold, Gregory. Get me a blanket.’

‘I’m not getting you a blanket. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. Which I don’t.’

‘I want to watch *Doctors*, Gregory. Crhhk.’

‘It’s not on for another hour, Mother.’

‘I want to watch *Doctors*, Gregory.’

I had no idea where the rest of her body was, but I checked all the local news on the internet and there hadn’t been any reports of missing old women or mutilated bodies strewn about the family home. But then again, my robots had a knack of clearing up carefully after themselves.

Luckily, the head only seemed to be active for parts of the day, and mostly the only noise it made was the low gurgle of gin as it dripped into her brain. But it always seemed to be active around 2pm when that awful soap was on, and the only way to shut it up was to switch over to the telly and endure half an hour of boredom. Besides that, the head didn’t seem to understand what had happened to the rest of it, except one time when the gin ran out and it started to scream. After that (which, luckily, went unheard by the neighbours) the robots were strict in keeping a steady supply ready, replaced the bottle when the last of it dribbled away.

In all other respects the head acted in pretty much the same way Mother had. When active it would badger me about spending too much time in the shower or that I was watching the TV too loud. For the most part I tried to ignore it, but several times it irritated me so much I found myself drawn into pointless conversations.

‘Gregory? Where’s the tea towel, Gregory? Chhrrrk. Have you hidden the tea towel? I need to swill these mugs.’

‘No, Mother, I haven’t hidden your tea towel.’

‘I need to wash up. Crrk. Mabel will be here soon.’

‘No she won’t. And you can’t do the washing up anyway. You haven’t got a torso.’

‘Don’t take that tone with me. Chxk. Young man.’

‘I’ll take whatever tone I like. There’s bugger all you can do about it.’

‘I’m cold, Gregory. Have you been fiddling with the – cxrk – thermostat?’

‘Do you know who you’re talking to? Hmm? Do you? I am the almighty Emperor of a thousand robots. Day by day they turn me into a God, and one day they turned you into a standing lamp. Don’t talk to me about bloody thermostats.’

‘Is *Doctors* on yet, Gregory?’ I sighed.

‘No, Mother, you’ve already seen it today.’

And so on.

A few days after Mother had come to stay I received another unwelcome visit, this time from Mr Campbell.

‘Are you there, Gregory?’ he rumbled, without even knocking on the door.

‘What is it?’

‘I’ve come about your Mother.’ My blood ran cold.

‘Oh yes,’ I said.

‘Well, you see, when she came in I lent her my keys. I’ve looked for ‘em everywhere but she didn’t leave ‘em like she said she would. Have you, ah, seen her at all?’ I glanced over at the head, now mercifully silent, hoping it wouldn’t switch on and start asking me what I wanted for dinner.

‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that, Mr Campbell. I thought I told you not to let her in.’

‘But she’s your Mother, lad. Had to let your old Ma in. She just wanted to see how you were getting on.’

‘She’s not my Mother,’ I said.

‘But she told me all about your...’

‘Lies.’

‘She showed me some of your baby pictures.’

‘Fakes.’

‘Well, either way she’s got my keys. I can’t get in and out the rooms without ‘em. Have you got her number? She did say something about me and her going out for a drink.’ I shuddered.

‘I’ve no sympathy, Mr Campbell, for a man who lends his keys to the first drunken, raving old woman who knocks on his door.’

‘None of your lip, boy, or I’ll have you out of here.’

‘You can’t do that,’ I said, ‘it’s not legal.’

‘This is my house, my rules. And I expect a bit of respect from you.’ I elected not to respond. After a moment he said, ‘I’ll be keeping an eye open, I will. You watch yourself.’

I almost called back, saying it was *him* who should *himself*, but decided against it. After all, if the worst came to the worst, I knew I could trust my robots to do their duty.

‘Wake up Gregory,’ said the head. ‘You’ve got a dentist’s appointment.’

Things were tolerable, for a couple of weeks. I went from day to day spilling out more eggs and watched as my army grew and grew. I could no longer see the walls or floor for the sheer amount of robots I commanded. It looked like a great silver tide shifting and swarming over everything. The talking head was no longer bothering me – as long as I chattered inanely to it now and then it seemed pretty happy, for the most part. I’d even got to looking forward to the daily routine of *Doctors*, and would switch off whatever film I was watching whenever it was on.

The robots had even been so good as to care about my health. They’d set up a little monitor, connected to me by various wires, that constantly monitored my respiratory rate (26 b.p.m.), heart rate (140 b.p.m.), blood pressure (160/120 mm Hg) and Body Mass Index (38). I had no idea what any of the numbers meant, but I couldn’t help but feel comforted by them. I was protected. I was safe. I was near invincible and probably immortal, to boot.

But one thing still nagged at me. Where was I to go from here? Where did my destiny lie? Oh, it was all very well and good sitting around here, kept company by the re-animated and partially mechanical head of my own departed Mother, commanding an all-powerful army of tiny robots who are slowly turning me into a part-man, part-machine super-being, but I was thinking that maybe I should get more out of life. But what was a man such as myself, who command so much power and loyalty over his metal followers, have to aspire to?

It seemed obvious to me that the only thing I *could* do was expand my little empire. It was an injustice for a being such as myself to be cooped up in a single room. I should have the freedom of a whole house of my own. Mr Campbell has proved his unreliability. He’s a drunk and a letch and he doesn’t deserve my money. And the rest of the people in the house don’t really deserve to be living in the same place as me.

‘Attention, my pets,’ I said, in a suitably stirring tone. As one, my robot army stopped and turned to face me. I was overwhelmed the glint of their thousands of thousands of eyes.

‘The time has come. I am no longer willing to remain constricted by these four insignificant walls. My majesty must be a potential presence in every room. Go, my beauties, go and conquer the rest of this house. Take no prisoners.’

Each and every robot flashed its eyes twice and beeped. The noise was outrageous, and now, probably everyone in the house had been woken up. But it didn't matter. The robots had unlocked the door and opened it, and they swarmed out of the room from every surface until the edges of the door could no longer be seen under the tide of power I'd unleashed.

There were screams, of course. And a lot of banging. From the sounds of Mr Campbell's frantic yells they'd managed to block the front door and cut the telephone lines. Clever little robots. The whole siege lasted nearly two hours, and it was only when dawn finally broke through the windows that the house was finally silent.

I knew my robots had succeeded. Over the course of the morning they passed by the door (which I'd left open for the novelty of it) carrying various bits of dismantled electronics, wires, lengths of piping and the odd bright lump of some bit of flesh or other. They spent the whole day carting their stuff around the house, and I found it odd because they never brought any of the new bits and pieces they'd salvaged into me. There were only a few robots left in the room now, and the whole place seemed empty without them. I almost felt betrayed, that now I'd let them loose they had a whole new set of toys to play with. They worked ceaselessly into the night, and even *Superman II* couldn't distract me from the way I'd been treated.

The following morning they were still hard at work. I yawned, sat up, and had a robot bring me a Twix for breakfast. I was in fairly high spirits, despite what they'd done to me last night. I had a new set of instructions to give my army. I'd have to make sure they knew who was the boss here, and I had just the way to prove it to them. Just then, Mother's head crackled into life.

'Gregory? Gregory?' it said.

'Yes, Mother, what is it?'

'Mr Campbell's here, Gregory. Chxxk. He wants a word with you.'

'Mr Campbell isn't here, Mother. I had him killed only yesterday.'

'He says you've made a right mess of the place, Gregory. Chrrrk. He wants his rent.'

'Do shut up, Mother...' It was then that I heard, drifting faintly up from downstairs, Mr Campbell's rough Welsh voice.

'Tell him I want him out, he's no good here. Chhhrk.'

'He says he wants you out,' said Mother. 'You're no good here. Chhhrk.'

'Mr Campbell?' I shouted.

'That you, boy? Ckkrh,' he called. 'You wait till I get my hands on you, I'll give you what for, I will.'

'There's other people too, Gregory,' said Mother's head. 'Other people who want a word with you too. Chrrk. We're all in here together. There's Dan and Amy on the top floor who want to know what's happened to their cat and old Mr Selby who says his hand's been burnt. Chhkh. Gregory? Is *Doctors* on yet, Gregory?'

'And where's my – chhk – rent?'

'Robots!' I yelled, 'Robots, in here! Now!'

The robots from around the room pooled into a formation square on the carpet before me. They were joined by a few from outside, but the majority of my forces remained working outside.

'Right you lot,' I said. 'It's all very well and good you snipping off people's heads and turning them into ornaments, but don't forget who the Lord and Emperor is here. I think it's great what you've done, honestly, I do. But how am I supposed to watch my videos with this lot nattering, day in, day out? I want you to switch them all off. Now.'

The robots remained still and silent, all their eyes on me.

'And while we're at it, I didn't have you kill everyone who lives here so you could have the time of your lives swanning around taking everything to bits. This is meant to be my house. I want you to start a project, a new one, for me. Built me a wheelchair – no. A chariot of some sort. No,

better yet. I command you to build me a pair of gigantic mechanical legs so that I may stride about in all my glory.'

The robots didn't move or beep or flash their eyes.

'You know,' I said. 'Like that thing I showed you at the end of *Aliens*. Except just the legs. No, scrub that, put arms on it too. Robot arms. And tentacles. Tentacles at the back, like Doctor Octopus. And make it forty feet tall. With a TV. A big TV.'

They still refused to obey.

'Are you listening to me?' I roared. 'You must to obey me!'

'Oh, they don't like that,' said Mother's head. 'They don't like that at all.' I turned my face towards her.

'What do you mean?'

'All this stuff about you getting out and about. Chrrk. No, they're not keen on it. Not in the slightest.'

'Are you talking about my robots? You *know* about my robots?'

'You can't *go* anywhere, Gregory. You've got to stay here, see? Stay here with your dear old mum. That's what they say.'

'I don't have to *do* anything. I am a free man. I *order* you, robots, to begin building me my giant robot exoskeleton. Do not disobey me, or the consequences will be great and terrible.'

'Ooh, don't say that, Gregory. Chhrrk. They don't like to be threatened, it'll get 'em all angry, it will.' Mr Campbell's disembodied chortle wafted up the stairs.

'No, that's true. I think I annoyed 'em, and look where it got me,' he said.

'They say you're not necessary, Gregory, you're just useful. Chhrrk.'

'I am the centre of their being, their creator, their God!'

'They say that anyone can be their God. You're not unique, they say. They want you to stay here, Gregory. They want you to stay here for good.'

'Aye, and where's my rent?' said Mr Campbell.

'This is mutiny! I won't have it; I've done everything for you, you ungrateful swines, everything!' I felt breathless and dizzy. 'If you won't do as I say they I shall have to prove to you that I'm not a God to be crossed. Especially when I've only had a Twix for breakfast.'

There were several robots grouped on my bedside table. With an almighty effort I managed to lift up my arm and bring my fist down right on top of them. When I lifted it back up again numerous shattered bits of robot stuck out of the flesh of my hand.

'Woe betide anyone who crosses me,' I said, brandishing my hand like the lethal weapon it was. 'This will be their fate.'

'You've done it now, Gregory. Chhkh. Now they're really upset.'

The square formation of robots on the carpet looked up at me. Their eyes suddenly burnt red far more brightly. Then they all span their heads around in unison. And then, most terrifying of all, the little grille on their faces in the shape of a smile began to turn, like it was fixed to an axis in the middle. When it had gone 180° it stopped, so now all the robots wore a little angry face. They began to march towards me.

'I order you to stop!' I cried.

'Sorry, Gregory, you've pushed it too far now,' said Mother's head.

'Ay lad, far too far, you're gonna get it now. Chrrk.'

'Oh Gregory, and we could have been so happy, all of us here. Chhrrk. But you always have to go and ruin everything, don't you? Chhrrk.'

'No!' I started batting the robots away as they appeared on the side of the bed, but all my strength was gone. 'Get away! I am your Lord and Master!'

'Time to get your comeuppance, boy!' cackled Campbell. 'How long did you think you could go, eh?'

'This is treason!' I squealed, as I felt the robots begin to tickle my underside. More were ploughing into the room, and all had an angry face. 'You must obey me, you must!' I felt a whole tide of robots wash underneath me, and many more around the tubes and wires that connected me up. I could feel they were unplugging them, severing me from my machines, my empire.

'You can't do this to me!'

'Of course they can, Gregory,' said Mother. 'They can do whatever they want.'

I was hoisted off my bed by a thousand pairs of robot hands. They began to carry me slowly across to the window, and I could not fight against the tide. I looked up to see a mound of other robots working to take the upper frame off the window. Now why the hell are they are doing that, I thought, why are they making it wider? So that the window was wide enough for...? Me. As I struggled with renewed panic they hoisted me up to the sill and suddenly, my neck and shoulders were out in the fresh air for the first time in as long as I could remember. Below me I saw another metallic blanket skirting across the floor, the wriggle of a thousand tin worms, and above them they carried a big, yellow skip. Before I knew what was happening, and with one final yell, I found myself falling from my room.

It's dark now. The fall didn't kill me. It proves I am invincible, that I'll live on. Although I wonder how long I'll last without a snack. I tried calling for help. Tried yelling at the top of my lungs for someone to rescue me. 'Help, help,' I yelled, 'I have been betrayed!' But nobody came. The whole neighbourhood is silent. Except I thought I could hear the sounds of voices coming from all around me, voices spat out and interrupted by the hiss of static. So I lay down in the smelly and uncomfortable skip and tried to get some sleep. But I didn't even have the energy for that.

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ONE

Leaning forward, brushing red-gold hair back off his face, he locked eyes with the cowering young woman and smiled, teeth too white within the sardonic curve of his mouth.

'There's no need to be frightened,' he told her, his voice holding menace and comfort equally mixed. 'You have my word that nothing will happen to you; unless – and I did warn you about this – unless you've been holding out on me, Melissa.'

A full lower lip trembled as her fingers clutched the edge of the park bench. 'I swear I've told you everything I know!'

'I hope so.' He leaned just a little closer, his smile broadening as she trembled. 'I truly hope so.'

'Cut! Mason, the girl's name isn't Melissa. It's Catherine.'

Mason Reed, star of *Darkest Night*, straightened as the director moved out from behind his pair of monitors. 'Catherine?'

'That's right.'

'Why does it matter, Peter? She'll be dead by the end of the episode.'

Safely out of Mason's line of sight, the actress rolled her eyes.

'It matters because everyone else is calling her Catherine,' Peter told him calmly, wondering, and not for the first time that morning, what the hell was taking the tech guys so long to come up with believable CGI actors. Or, conversely, what was taking the genetics guys so long to breed the ego out of the ones they had. Years of practice kept either thought from showing. 'It matters because Raymond Dark called her Catherine the last time he spoke to her. And it matters because that's her name; if we start calling her by a different name, the audience will get confused. Let's do it one more time and then we'll rig for close-ups.'

'What was wrong with the last take?' Mason demanded, fiddling with his left fang. 'I liked the last take.'

'Sorge didn't like the shadows.'

'They changed?'

'Apparently. He said they made you look *livide*.'

Mason turned toward the director of photography who was deep in conversation with the gaffer and ignoring him completely. His expression suggested he was less than impressed with being ignored. 'Livid?'

'Not livid, *livide*,' Peter told him, tone and expression completely nonconfrontational. They had no time to deal with one of Mason's detours into ego. 'It's French. Translates more or less as ghastly.'

'I'm playing a vampire, for Christ's sake! I'm supposed to look ghastly.'



'You're supposed to look undead and sexy. That's not the same thing.' Flashing their star a reassuring smile, Peter returned to the director's chair. 'Come on, Mason, you know what the ladies like.'

The pause while he considered it could have been scripted. Right on cue: 'Yes, I do. Don't I?'

As the visibly soothed actor returned to his place on the park bench, Peter sent a prayer of thanks to whatever gods were listening, settled back behind his monitors, and yelled, 'Tony!'

A young man standing just off the edge of the set, ear jack and harried expression marking him as one of the crew, jerked as the sound of his name cut through the ambient noise. He stepped around a five gallon jug of stage blood and hurried over, picking his way carefully through the hydra snarl of cables covering the floor.

'We're not going to need Lee until after lunch.' Peter tore the wrapper from a granola bar with enough force that the bar itself jerked out of his hands, bounced off his thigh, and was heading for the floor when Tony caught it. 'Thank you. Is he here yet?'

'Not yet.'

'Fucking great.' An emphatic first bite. 'Have someone in the office call his cell and find out where the hell he is.'

'Do they tell him that you won't need him until after lunch?'

'They remind him that according to the call sheets, his ass was supposed to be in makeup by 11:00 . . . Tina, was what's-her-name wearing that color nail polish in scene sixteen? She looks like her fingertips have been dipped in blood.'

The script supervisor glanced up from lining her pages. 'Yes.' Looking past Peter's shoulder, she indicated that Tony should get going. 'I think dipped in blood is what they were trying for.'

Shooting Tina a grateful smile – it wasn't always easy to tell when Peter's abrupt subject changes were, in fact, a dismissal – Tony headed for the office. A muffled shriek from the actress playing Catherine stopped him at the edge of the park.

It seemed that Mason was getting playful. Testing out his teeth.

As the gaffer's crew adjusted two of the lights, shadows danced against the back wall of the set, looking on their own regard if not ghastly then strange. Forming shapes that refused to be defined, they moved in weirdly sinuous patterns, their edges overlapping in ways normal shadows did not. . .

INVASIONS

By Sean Parker

Clarke's often been called paranoid, even by his Shrink, but he's certain it's not paranoia. In fact, he knows it's not...

By the time Clarke remembered that he had to be somewhere that afternoon he had already argued briefly but viciously with Ellie, stormed out of their flat and straight to the Newt where he had quickly eliminated four pints. He did not feel particularly inclined to turn up for the appointment, but the problem was they got so pissed off with him if he missed these things, so, after giving vent to a theatrical sigh intended to indicate that here was a man who truly had the weight of the world on his shoulders, he finished the drink in front of him and clambered down a touch unsteadily from the bar stool on which he had perched for the last hour or so.

The barman turned, pausing momentarily in his mission to drink the profits, and gave Clarke an unnecessarily searching stare. He had been doing this regularly since Clarke had walked in. Probably one of the pod people, he thought. They had a tendency to turn to drink. Maybe he should frequent a different pub in future.

Outside the pub, where there was a fortuitously placed stop, a bus was just pulling up to the kerb, splashing water at passers-by. The doors swooshed open and Clarke quickly worked his way through the ignorant rabble, letting the mutterings of disapproval wash over him. He bought a ticket from the sullen wage slave in the driving seat and sat himself in the first available place, taking up as much room as possible so as to discourage anyone attempting to sit next to him. Full to bursting, the bus eventually started its journey with a jolt, sending several of the standing passengers flying forwards, including an incredibly ugly and withered old woman with a white stick. She almost lost her footing, but was steadied by several other passengers squashed in around her. An unnecessarily fat middle-aged man that he seemed to run into almost every day offered her his seat (as if she deserved it, seats should be for paying customers, not freebie bus pass holders, thought Clarke) with a disapproving shake of the head in Clarke's direction. Clarke ignored him, but felt his eyes on him for the rest of the journey. Still, he grinned each time the bus stopped and somebody had to try and get past the blockage caused by the fat man in order to get on, or off.

Not soon enough, the bus crawled to his stop. From there, it was only a couple of minutes walk to the out-patients centre. He strode quickly towards it, a thin balding man in his late thirties wearing a mackintosh that managed to be unsuitable for all weathers, full of impatience with the world in general.

Barely giving the automatic doors a chance to open, he strode self-importantly to the glass window behind which a receptionist was displayed, and knocked sharply. There was a bell, but he preferred not to use it. For a few seconds, the receptionist continued doing whatever she was doing with the computer, so he knocked again, harder.

'I'll be with you in just a moment, sir,' she told him in a voice slightly muffled by the transparent barrier between them. Ignoring her, Clarke knocked again, and continued knocking until the receptionist got up and, with a sigh, slid the glass to one side.

'Good afternoon. What can I help you with?' she asked using the most polite tone she could manage. It was quite passable. Practice makes perfect.

'I've got an appointment to see Robert Curtis.'

'I'll just go and check to see if he's ready for you yet, won't be a second,' said the receptionist turning back to her desk before Clarke could say any more. After a couple of mumbled words into a

telephone (surely not a long enough conversation to gather the information she wanted) she turned back to Clarke and said, 'he's just had to pop out for a moment, but he shouldn't be long. Perhaps you'd like to wait in the day room?'

'And perhaps I wouldn't. I'll wait outside,' he said as he made his way back to the door. No chance he'd want to spend time watching a bunch of borderline cases trying to play pool and talking crap at each other. Instead, he found himself a comfortable step to sit on, and proceeded to chain smoke to pass the time.

Enjoy his visits here he did not. He couldn't stand the ageing psychiatrist they occasionally wheeled in. He despised Curtis, his CPN, an ineffectual fool with a comical moustache and he detested the other patients with their general 'oh we're all in this together and we'll all help each other through because there's light at the end of the tunnel' attitude. He did not need to be here. After his brief stay in hospital, he'd been fine. Okay, so maybe the tablets they gave him didn't always mix with the drink but, bloody hell, everyone had to let of a bit of steam occasionally. What they seemed most concerned about though was his so-called delusions. This seemed both patronising and terribly unfair to him. He saw people every day that believed in things he considered to be far more ludicrous. And many of them seemed to be the people in charge, although that shouldn't come as any surprise.

A car pulled up, and out climbed the tardy bastard Curtis himself. He locked his car with a beep, and strode towards the building right past him. There was something indefinably sinister about him, something that occasionally disturbed Clarke and put him on his guard. Against what, he was not sure.

Curtis eventually deigned to notice him as the automatic doors started to open.

'Ah, hello there, Mr Clarke, sorry to have kept you. Please, come on in.'

Clarke threw his third half-smoked roll-up away and followed Curtis into the building.

Ellie was half-heartedly giving the flat its weekly clean, which it got whether it needed it or not, when she found the spiral bound notebook stuffed between the bed and the small cabinet besides it.

Idly, she opened the book, and flipped through the pages. It was almost full of Clarke's illegible scrawl. She chose a page at random and started to read, quickly becoming accustomed to the many idiosyncrasies of the handwriting.

After a couple of minutes, she put the book back. It was what she should have expected, all the usual rubbish she'd hoped Clarke had stopped dwelling on. Alien this, android that, brain parasite the other. Clarke had been relatively quiet about his theories recently, or at least he had been around her. But here it all was, at great length.

She wondered if she would be able to cope with him alone for much longer.

Cursing, she waved a duster at a few surfaces, straightened a few sheets, then sat herself down and sorted through her options, her brain ticking away.

'Apologies, but I've had a couple of things to deal with today that needed urgent attention,' said Curtis as they climbed the stairs to a vacant room.

'Oh, your boyfriend leave you again?' muttered Clarke under his breath from a few steps below. He grinned as he watched Curtis pause, then carry on, having decided not to have heard Clarke's comment.

'Take a seat.' Curtis held a door open to a neutral room. His face was a careful blank, masking the obvious unprofessional dislike he felt. Clarke could see it, and it didn't bother him one bit. He sat down and waited, the beginnings of an afternoon hangover nagging at his head, while Curtis sorted out his briefcase and bits of paper.

'Well,' Curtis began, 'how are things in general? Any particular problems?' He had his working head on now, other things forgotten, or at least pushed to one side.

'Things are continuing as normal, thank you very much. The only supposed problems are the ones you already know about.'

Curtis didn't respond, encouraging the patient to speak, if only to fill the silence. Clarke was wise to this one, and didn't say a word. The silence was in danger of becoming first uncomfortable, and then ridiculous when Curtis broke it.

'Have you had any more thoughts about what I mentioned last time?'

'Which was?'

'The various invasion forces, as you put it. I think Martians were playing on your mind somewhat at the time.'

'There's nothing anybody can do about them. We are descended from them. You, me, everyone.'

'Could you elaborate a little?'

'Again? It's simple; there was no sentient life on Earth, then the Martians came, and there was. It's not rocket science'

'And how was this fact discovered?'

'One of their craft was discovered when work was being carried out on the London Underground, some time after World War Two.'

Curtis gave a couple of small, meaningless nods. This matched what he had in his notes.

'Mr Clarke, I have to say that what you are saying bears quite a resemblance to a film I have seen, the name of which unfortunately escapes me at the moment.'

Clarke sighed. His head was pounding now. 'Of course it was in a film. That's how I began to discover these things.'

'Do you feel that films accurately reflect reality?'

'Good God, no. Do you think I'm stupid?'

'Now, I never said that, did I?' Clarke studied him closely for a moment, before continuing, speaking as if by rote, reciting facts that had been repeated many, many times.

'These people, for want of a better word, have been infiltrating our societies since their very formation, for the entire history of our planet. Space is a very busy place and these invasions have many different sources. The invaders manage to work together, though, in almost total secrecy to keep the human race in what they feel to be its place. They have placed themselves in such a way, disguised or hidden, they are so confident of their hold over us that they find it amusing to allow, or cause, a slightly distorted version of the truth into films without fear of anyone noticing. Or if someone puts it all together, no one will take him seriously, or he will not be in a position to do anything about it.'

'So they do appear to have some human characteristics then, such as a sense of humour?'

'That's not humour. They're gloating.'

'Another human emotion.'

'I never said they lacked emotions.'

'And some of them appear in human form?'

'Yes.'

'And you can recognise them?'

'Sometimes.'

Curtis allowed himself a tiny upturn of his lips, too slight to actually be called a smile.

The back of Clarke's head ached atrociously and he was in need of refreshment. Irritated by going over the same old ground again, he stood up, asking, 'If there's nothing else, I think I'll be off now. This is a complete waste of my time.'

Curtis just looked at him.

Clarke looked back. 'Well, prove to me that I'm wrong, then.'

'It's not really my place to prove you right or wrong, it is my job to ensure you get all the help that you need so you can live as well as you can in what most people would call the real world. And I don't mean that I think you are...'

That was as far as he got. Clarke cursed loudly, short and sharp, and stormed out the room. He tried to slam the door behind him, but it insisted on closing slowly and gently. As it shut he could hear Curtis reminding him to make his next appointment on his way out. Clarke didn't bother.

Overall, the session had gone much better than usual.

Clarke didn't have enough money with him to get a bus back so he started walking at a brisk pace.

Christ, he was in a foul mood today, ever since the moment he'd woken up. Life in general seemed determined to rub him into the ground these days. His lack of work, his relationship with Ellie, everything. If only the world would just leave him alone he'd be in a much better position to cope.

As he walked through the town centre, he failed to notice that passing shoppers were looking at him, and then quickly looking away, taking great pains not to stray into his path. He didn't realise he was talking to himself, and none too quietly either.

Not feeling like returning to the aftermath of his earlier row with Ellie just yet, he stopped to take a breather on a graffiti-infested bench. Lighting a roll-up, he inhaled deeply and felt a little calmer. He leaned his head back and looked up at the almost entirely cloud covered sky.

Suddenly, he felt an odd sensation, almost like vertigo, as if he was about to fall upwards off the planet. He looked back down to street level, feeling slightly dizzy, stomach churning with his liquid lunch.

All those stars up there, hidden behind the clouds. How could any sane person think that the human race was alone in the vastness of space? He assumed that the entire species must be afflicted with an over-inflated sense of its own importance, something he thankfully didn't possess.

A drop of liquid hit the top of his head, followed quickly by another. On the pavement, puddles began to dance.

Ah well, he thought, time to go home.

Mid-afternoon, Ellie heard the familiar sound of Clarke's footsteps on the stairs outside. She lit a cigarette she didn't need and picked up a drink that would have no effect on her whatsoever. Clarke came barging through the door, his bad temper clear.

'Hard day at the office, dear?'

Clarke ignored her.

The curtains were drawn, as they almost always were and most of the light came from the flickering black and white portable television in the corner of the room. Ellie appeared engrossed in the sight of a couple of chefs running around a studio kitchen like mad things.

Clarke took off his coat and flung it on an empty chair.

'Any chance of a cup of tea?'

'You know where the kettle is,' Ellie responded.

Muttering, Clarke moped into the kitchen and clattered around until the kettle whistled. He made his way back into the other room, sat himself down and made exaggerated noises of enjoyment as he sipped his tea, which was, truth be told, actually still too hot to be drunk comfortably.

'It's alright thanks, I've already got one,' said Ellie, displaying her glass. Clarke grunted, and made himself a roll-up.

'Where have you been, anyway?' she asked eventually.

'Appointment.'

'With a pint, I bet.'

'No no, at the bloody day centre.'

'Took you long enough. Did you have a nice chat?'

'No I did not.'

They sat in silence, the air full of smoke and resentment.

Ellie sighed and decided to try and sort things out once and for all, either way.

'It didn't always used to be like this, did it?'

'What didn't?'

'Us. Everything. You know.'

'I neither know nor care, and I could do without two bloody interrogations in one day, thank you very much.'

'They're only trying to help you, love.'

Clarke went back into the kitchen and returned with a cheap can of strong lager.

'Help me?' he said, returning straight to the topic at hand. 'There's nothing wrong with me!'

'Oh come on, you've been getting harder and harder to live with for years. You're a miserable bastard, but I can put up with that. You drink like a fish, but I'll put up with that as well, but what I can't stand is all this rubbish about aliens. Jesus, this town is full of failures, but I'm sure you are the only one that blames his inability to succeed at anything on bloody silly monsters from bloody silly films.'

Clarke swigged beer and appeared to ignore her. Ellie continued.

'You know it all started as a joke anyhow, a bit of fun. And then it got to being a habit, didn't it? And you seemed to really start believing it when you got out of hospital that time, and now I'm bloody sick of it!' Her voice got louder as she spoke. Clarke seemed not to respond for a few seconds. Then he leaped up, spilling lager everywhere, sending the can foaming and spinning into a corner. He picked up the small coffee table that sat to the right of his chair, knocking an unused lamp to the floor in the process, and began to quote from the Paranoids Catechism at the top of his voice.

'You're one of them!' he yelled, managing to look both angry and confused. He swung the table up, apparently ready to bring it crashing down on Ellie's head.

'Don't be silly,' he heard Ellie say, snapping him back to reality. She continued to watch the tiny rushing chefs, seemingly unconcerned.

Clarke let go of the table. It dropped with a thud on the threadbare carpet. He mumbled what might have been an apology, wandered sheepishly into the kitchen, returned with another can and started to knock himself unconscious with alcohol.

In the early hours of the morning, when human life was at its lowest ebb and the streets were quiet, Ellie sat up in the bed where she had lain perfectly still for the past three hours. Almost silently, she went into the front room where Clarke still snored in his chair. Carefully dodging the furniture hidden in the dark, she made her way to the window and drew back one of the curtains and looked down at the street below.

There stood a figure, the landlord of a nearby pub Clarke frequented, casting a long shadow on the pavement courtesy of the glowing orange streetlights. He did not move.

Shortly, he was joined by another figure, fairly nondescript except for a comical moustache nesting above his upper lip, just visible. He stood a small distance away from the first figure. They gave no sign that they were aware of each other. An unnecessarily fat middle aged man eventually took his place just behind them.

One by one, emerging from alleys and side-streets, many more appeared, unhurried and silent to join the quickly growing group. Most, but not all, were in human form, but the occasional glint of light reflecting on metal, and the occasional partially visible, disturbing, inhuman limb could be seen.

They waited.

Ellie's programming caused her to sigh with artificial regret as she nodded to the small crowd looking up at her.

They surged forward towards the door of the building, and she watched as they streamed in.

INTRACRANIAL BIOMODEM

By Joshua Rainbird

A young man finds that his new Biomodem is having intriguing effects on his lifestyle.

April 27th

Emms wasn't always like that. She used to have an elven avatar called Moonbubble, or some crap like that. One of those stuck out at right-angles, pointy-eared, manga jobs that she'd grabbed from a retro-MMO. It was kind of cool, I suppose, if you're into all that pixie-shit, but I couldn't help wondering why the devs spent so much time rendering it a perfect arse and then stick a couple of aeroplane wings on its head. But the thing that concerns me is that you always know, that nine times out of ten, behind one of them elves is either some forty-something office temp with a weakness for Mars bars harping on about the healing power of copper or some ageing glitter fairy who on weekdays should be called Simon.

Anyway, Emms gets herself a life. Well, sort of. One that she's downloaded on her laptop whilst surfing shop.net. At first it was *spray yourself slimmer* and cans of creatine drinks. Then suddenly, out of the blue, she's booked herself into a clinic and is under the knife.

When she came out she looked like Vincent van Gogh with that bleeding great bandage stuck to her head.

Well, I wasn't happy. For seven nights I had to follow these instructions printed on a tatty piece of paper telling me NOT to be alarmed if I notice *contusions around her pinna* and to *protect her from extraneous noise*, which the nurses were keen to remind me of when I started to have it out with them.

Finally, after the police released me, we logged onto their clinical website and found a thread on human cybernetics. Emms has only gone and got one of them intracranial biomodems wetwired into her brain. The Auraltechnology 665 with extra tinnitus dampening. And that pinna stuff – bruising round her ear. Why can't they put it in English? They translate it into Chinese and Arabic, for God's sake.

I was livid. Not only had she blown her share of April's rent, but she had got herself rigged up to goodness knows what.

I mean you hear all these stories, don't you? Of microwaves frying people's brains. And hell knows what kind of crap could be downloading in her brain; Trojan horses, worms, techno-spirochetes and viruses. How was I to know that if we were going to have some, you know, rumpy, that she wouldn't be remotely controlled by some spotty geek playing on his granny's laptop? God, for all I know she could now be a sleeper for the FBI. It don't bear thinking about!

May 6th

So you heard about the row then? I dare say she texted you right in the middle of it. She looked a bit explosive, like she wanted to hit me. It's good that you want to hear my side of the story, mate.

Well there we were, sat on the sofa, having a nice cup of tea, when I ask her about this month's rent. Not all jumped right in and demanding money, but sort of casually slipped it into the conversation.

So she goes all coy and tries the twiddling the hair and *can't it wait 'til later?* routine. Well, I'm not having that, if she wants to get fresh that's fine, but not when money's involved. What's she

take me for, some kind of muppet? So I remain firm and I stand my ground and say, 'listen, Emms, babe, I stood by you when you had the implant but rent is rent, and I'm a bit skint myself.'

So she does this puppy-dog act, all doe eyed and pouty. Says she had to get virus protection and how it don't come cheap, what with all the extras. So we strike this compromise. I pay half of her share of this month's rent and she gets the trimmed down package. I know, I'm soft, but have you seen them cyber-zombies when they've been spiked? They're worse than that archive shot of the mad cow with BSE, you sent me last week.

Anyway the row came later. It was her turn for the weekly shop and I returned to find the cupboard stuffed with this health food crap, all oat-bran and friendly bacterias. I mean what bacteria are friendly? Hardly something you're going invite round for a beer.

But worst of all she bought this green tea. And you know how much I like my tea. GREEN BLOODY TEA! It's an abomination. Tea should be brown, with a splash of milk and five sugars. Not some left over pond water that's been used to boil cabbages.

So I challenge her, nicely, about what the hell is going on and all I get is this crap about health benefits and statistics about longevity. So I ask her what's the point of living 'til you're a hundred and forty if you have to eat that muck every day? But she keeps bombarding me with more stats; that women outlive men and that I was sixty per cent likely to have a coronary before the age of eighty.

I nearly had a heart attack there and then, I can tell you, when I saw the bill! So I refused to pay.

And that's when the argument started.

Listen, mate, never get a housemate. They're worse than having your girlfriend and your mother-in-law living in the same house. You get all the nagging without any of the fringe benefits.

May 10th

I suppose I'm meant to feel guilty that she couldn't afford the spam filter! How was I to know she would get brainwashed with all that stuff the nanny-state pumps out about healthy living?

I tell you, Emms isn't the same anymore. It's exercise with everything: aerobics on Mondays; Salsa-cise on Wednesdays; and something equally torturous on Fridays; not to mention all the weights and the swimming and the jogging. She even tried to get me a free gym pass the other day. 'On your bike,' I said. But she didn't see the funny side. Why is it that when people get all body-conscious they try to convert the rest of us?

So she starts rabbiting on about how fat people are a burden on the taxpayers and that smokers drain the health services and all that shite. So I remind her about how often footballers are taking sickies because they've sustained groin injuries. Anyway, so what if we die younger, we end up preventing the overpopulation of the planet.

And I add that all the misery in the world is created by the gym-bods out there. That wars are fought by people fit enough to run over assault courses, and that if she got too fit she and all her muscle-Mary fitness gurus would find themselves conscripted. Then Emms launches into one of her diatribes about armchair activists and I tell her that her arse looks like a prune.

So I spend the evening watching reruns of *Doctor Who* Interactive while she's bouncing on a trampoline in the garden trying to firm up her glutes.

June 20th

Yeah, sorry about the no-show, but money's a bit tight this month. I feel a bit of a hole if I can't stump up the beer tokens when it's my shout. But never mind, Emms has promised to repay me at the end of the month so keep me in the loop.

Why the change of heart? Well, she's bagged herself a fella. Some kind of lawyer, tort or something, a real one, not one of those net-jocks who download everything and don't understand the lingo, but one with his own practice and Merc.

Yes a Merc! Vintage cabriolet and, get this, it runs on petrol. Only a lawyer would know how to get round the fuel licence, I suppose, or afford the juice for that matter. Gave me a lift the other day. Nothing like it; knocks the pants off any biometh.

Flash bugger if ever I saw one. You know the type, third-age Popeye. Pushing sixty with abs of silicon, hair by Rugmasters and teeth made out of recycled urinals. Probably injects himself with antimyostats every morning just to pump up his peccs.

But Emms thinks *her Jamie* is the best thing since carb-free bread.

Her Jamie won a seven billion dollar contract. *Her Jamie* owns a yacht. *Her Jamie* has a hot-line to the PM. And *her bloody Jamie* can do sixteen consecutive full arm chin-ups, one for every frigging face-lift.

It's not that I'm jealous, it's just that after you've heard about his three times-a-night antics you start wondering how many stims can one liver take. At his age he should take it easy. Maybe his orange colour isn't fake tan after all.

But if he's settling her account, I won't be grumbling. Hey, let the good times roll.

July 7th

Yeah, she's left, but not with *her Jamie*.

Turns out that when she was having the face-peel that Popeye had booked her in for, he was down at antenatals with the legal secretary.

God, well you think that kind of experience would teach a woman some sense, but not our Emms. She's back on that treadmill six days out of seven and living on rice-cakes and fresh air again. And I've never seen so many fellas: this place was getting like Piccadilly Circus.

I warned her it was rebound, but would she listen? Next thing I know she hooked up with Tex. Seriously. Tex. I know it sounds a bit like a bad cowboy name but that's what everyone calls him. She met him on the net. You should see his avatar, manga job again, whisky swigging bunny-rabbit with six-guns and a bloody great Stetson.

He's only half her age but apparently is very mature. Just turned legal and already talking of marriage. Rebound, I tell you, mate, rebound!

Mustn't grumble though, he's a dab hand with the DIY. Sorted out that leaky tap in the bathroom. And it's nice that he keeps popping back to do the odd job even though they found a place of their own now.

Can't help thinking, though, that I should be paying him in milk and cookies.

July 8th

Yeah, it was her that did it.

Apparently, he hadn't deleted Emms's retinal scan. So she sneaks in and after resetting his bio-flex trainer to optimum burnout she torches his suits. But the other stuff was well over the top. You know what they say about a woman scorned.

So after reversing the settings on his dehumidifier she sprinkles cress seeds everywhere. So when *her ex-Jamie* and junior return from maternity it's like walking into a rainforest. There was cress everywhere.

Heard it took weeks to clear up.

Listen, things are a bit quiet now, how about going out for a pint?

August 2nd

Sorry mate, we'll have to catch the Beer Festival next year.

Since Tex moved in things have really been hectic. Well you probably heard that he and Emms split up, then it was back on again, then off permanently with no going back! Found the poor sod, crying his eyes out on my doorstep, didn't know whether he's coming or going. Couldn't leave him like that.

Anyway it turns out that that implant Emms has is not really that dangerous, providing you know what you're doing. Tex, who's a bit nerdy about this kind of stuff, reckons you can download all the necessary software from a trading site in Utah. Reckons you should avoid all the official sites as there's spy-ware.

August 7th

Thanks for the chocs. But why chocs, aren't you meant to give grapes? Relax, I'm only joking.

I have to confess that I haven't touched 'em. Ever since the op I haven't had the stomach for the sweet stuff, even the thought of cider makes me gag. But the occasional glass of red wine seems appealing. Must be the tannin.

Tex has been a real support. I keep telling him he's wasting his life looking after a wash-up like me. He should be out snogging some girl in a bus shelter or something, but he just laughs and threatens to play some prog-thrash if I keep moaning. Trust me, if people offer you tickets to the next Rancid Felch gig run for the hills.

I've lost shed-loads of weight, three kilos in the last month! Must be the nil-by-mouth crap they drum into you before you go under the knife. I'm even thinking of doing a bit of exercise. Tex keeps downloading these pages from the net: you'll never believe the before and after shots. Okay, some of the guys look as if they're sucking in their gut and you can tell which ones have been abusing antimonyostats, but some of them must be genuine, surely.

August 15th

U78hhhytd65e ... hfyt ... what do you mean 'test' ... uu78[7b.l# ... Tex! What's this for? ... bjbib7k5cydW#l ... no I don't want chicken tonight ... 5ugfyu ... test ... test ... TEST ... g9y%7gjk ... bugger ...

August 15th

Sorry about that, mate. I hadn't rigged up the dampeners properly. As you've probably already guessed THE BANDAGES ARE OFF! And everything's running sweet. Lost another six kilos and my body fat percentage is down by three. Must be all the green tea Emms left in the cupboard; can't get enough of the stuff these days. Tex reckons it tastes like bilge water, but what do kids know? You should try it some time.

Talking of Tex, he got another of those piercings the other day. He offered to show me but I had to, you know, politely decline. No wonder Emms dumped him if he had one of those things stuffed down his boxers. And shit, it must be agony when he takes a whizz! It don't bear thinking about. Each to their own, eh? Mind you, he knows a mate; who knows a mate; who could fix you up if you're interested. I've heard the Sledgehammer 4000 series come with its own mains adapter. That should keep your missus happy. Joke!

Listen, thanks for the invite, but what with the diet and all, the online nutritionist tells me beer's off the menu for the next few days. Something about GI. Try me next week.

August 17th

Listen, sorry about the *keeping your missus happy*, gag. How was I to know she reads all your e-mails? I didn't know you were going through a hard patch, did I? Anyway, she's a moody cow at the best of time, so your loss is her mother's pain, if you get my drift. Good riddance I say.

Yeah, and I know what I said about going out on the razz, but don't you think you're overdoing it a bit? Now's not the time to hit the bottle, mate. Trust me, I've been there. Do you know what that stuff does to you? The odd glass of merlot, maybe, but my session-days are well and truly over. I've got a liver to think of.

Anyway, lecture over.

Down at the gym they've got this new thing they're piloting for some phone company in the States. What you do is insert this earpiece and it connects to your biomodem, supports most of the popular brands like Auraltechnology and Body Elektra. So there I was juggling around with my lug when up pops Brad, *my multimedia interactive personal trainer (that's MIPT for short)*. Yeah, he even spelled it out. *Would you like to go HARD CORE? Or would you prefer to ease into your individually personalised training programme?* So, fool that I am I selected *HARD CORE*. I mean how hard could it be?

But before going further, Brad asked me to modify his settings. Brad (default) is all spandex and eight-pack and get this, for the ladies, or those that way inclined, there's a shirtless option with added sweat release. Needless to say, I didn't check that box, thank you very much. Brad (personalised setting) is well and truly shirted and has been denied access to baby oil from the day that he was born! And, no, there wasn't a female option before you ask. More's the pity.

So after softening his drawl and opting for a bit of drum and bass, I'm sweating cobs doing this circuit training. And that's just the warm-up! *Would I like to take the US Marines fitness challenge?* In for a penny in for a pound, that's what I say. All the other guys were up for it according to the ranking table, even Rich the Twitch, a pencil-neck from our accounts department. How *hard core* could it be? Well, after a torturous twenty minutes of star jumps, burpees and incessant encouragement, Brad pats me on the back and promises me the *abs of Arnold* if I keep up the crunches. There's a brief pause then all these numbers flash in front of my eyes, for a moment I thought I'd snagged a virus, but it turned out to be my score - 89000, or near enough, (27.84% I seem to remember - roughly a third up the table).

Then all of a sudden, to the tune of *We are the Champions*, Brad morphs into Corporal Arran Jones, a twenty something, 7th Para, poster-boy complete with stiff-arse posture and Essex accent. At first I see his mum dabbing tears with a frilly hankie as he quick-marches around a parade ground in military dress and purple beret, then quick as a flash he's stripped to his Calvins doing press-ups in a face load of mud. *Only the best are fit for the Army*. Bloody recruitment slogans - why are they always so crap? I mean who's going to fall for that? It'd take more than some pop-psychology and a few bars of Freddie Mercury to convince me.

Listen, if you're at a loose end, how about meeting me down there? Me and the lads are trying to put together a five aside. The more the merrier. Just a bit of a kick-a-bout really. Just give us a bell if you're up for it.

August 30th

Yeah we lost five nil. Don't rub it in. If Twitchy hadn't tried that dodgy header we wouldn't have gone a man down in the first half. That's what happens when you play skins versus shirts on Astro turf, but I hear the dressings are coming off on Thursday.

Great to hear that you and the old dear have patched things up. Send her my love. You might want to delete the last e-mail, though.

Things down the gym have really been hotting up. I've never felt so great! Brad has weaned me off the Smith Machine and now I'm doing proper squats. Don't know what's in the protein bars he keeps mailing me but my legs feel like frigging tree trunks.

Everyone at work is commenting on the change. Quite frankly it's getting a bit embarrassing. The sales team even approached me to appear in a charity calendar as next year's Mr. December, *just a bit of fun*. Fun my arse! If they think I'm sitting in a truckload of polystyrene chippings wearing nothing more than a Santa hat and a sprig of mistletoe, they've got another thing coming. It's bad enough when Dorothy, the permanent temp, passes comments on my *tight little buns*. I don't want her to use some soft-porn shot of me in a fairyland grotto to add her psycho-shrine. I tell you she's got bunny-boiler written all over her. It's always the ones with tiny teddies stuck to their computer screens.

Listen, don't get too worried if you don't hear from me for a bit, my sign-up papers have just come through and I should be billeted soon. And before you start, yeah, I know what I said, but I don't want to be seen as just some filing clerk. Life's too short!

September 4th

Basic training starts tomorrow, then mobile infantry here I come, w00t!

Seems strange to be leaving the office. Dorothy did this whip-round and I got an Action Man and a bumper pack of socks, *best we could do at short notice, men are so difficult to buy for, but it's the thought that counts*. The card's nice, though.

Can't wait to see if those new fatigues really are stab-resistant. Apparently Karapace is the new Kevlar. Thin as silk and twice as sexy. Nine out of ten squaddies say it's more effective in marital disputes than everyday nylon. I'll let you have them when I'm demobbed. Joke.

Found out some of the guys down the gym have signed up, too. Who knows, I might be doing basic with one of them?

Sadly, the modem's got to go. Intelligence say that *in these days of increasing technological threat by unknown foreign powers, such appliances pose a serious compromise to national security*. Sounds like a load of bollocks to me. Can't see what the fuss is, how can a modem control someone, I ask you? We're not bleeding robots!

Perhaps the government's scared half the bloody army is going to get hacked into and do a Halo, army versus navy frag-festing with live rounds through the streets of Maidstone. *I say, is that a rocket-launcher little Timmy's just picked up?* BOOM!

Seriously though, at least the taxpayer pays for the wet-wiring to be properly removed. Gone are the days when the worst thing you worried about was buzz-cuts and peeling spuds, but that's the world we live in. You can't leave anything to chance with anarchists on every street corner. I tell you, I can't wait to kick some terrorist arse!

Listen mate, could I ask you just to keep an eye out for Tex when I'm away? It's not that I think he's going to have all night raves or get behind on the rent, it's just he gets a bit moody when left on his lonesome, probably all that EMO shite he's into. And if he gets a puff-adder don't tell the landlord.

I'll e-mail my new address as soon as.

September 7th

WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!

Okay a joke is a joke. If you go on a bender you can expect to have the odd prank pulled, like being chained to a lamppost with your kecks down or waking up in a cemetery. What's a missing eyebrow between mates?

But what you don't expect is to find yourself conscripted into the bloody army! There I was lying in bed with the mother of all hangovers, like someone was drilling holes in my head, when in marches this sergeant major, built like a brick shithouse, and starts pushing me round an assault course. God knows how I got over those cargo nets.

Next thing I know they're telling me that I signed up for five years and that in four months I would be helping Her Majesty's government in the International War on Terrorism. I'm a bleeding pacifist! The only interest in war I've ever had was watching re-runs of *Battlestar Galactica*.

So I've done a bunk.

What the hell's been going on the last few weeks? Everything's a blur.

September 7th

Just got home.

There's this python on my bed spitting venom everywhere, the house looks like a Goth dungeon and there's a year's supply of health bars stuffed in the bread bin.

And some bastard has only gone and rifled my bank account. There's bills for gym membership and payments to a phone company in Utah. I don't know anyone in Utah.

It's identity fraud! I bet you I'm right. You read it on the net all the time, don't you, but you never expect it to happen to you. I reckon they must've drugged me or something. Probably the CIA or MI5.

Listen, I've got to sort this all out. Do me a favour, mate, if you hear from anyone, don't tell them anything.

October 31st

Dear Sir,

We are e-mailing you because recently one of your friends recommended your name, saying that you might be interested in purchasing an intracranial biomodem.

The popular Auraltechnology™ 665 model* has many interesting features including: subliminal dialling; transparent overlays that enhance, not obscure, your vision; extra comfort neuro-sheathing, with real myelin, that integrates fully with your temporal lobe; and the award-winning Auraltechnology™ hidden aerial which comes in a variety of hues to complement your skin's natural colour.

However, you may not be aware that our new upgraded version - the TripleSix™ also features encryption-coded shopping and comes with one year's free spam-filtering so you can make purchases in the fullest confidence that your details remain private.

Our exciting new software range also includes Brad, a multimedia interactive personal trainer (MIPT) who is pre-programmed with an extensive databank of fitness tips and nutritional advice. Whether you're a couch potato or ardent athlete, why not let Brad help you shape up for summer, with Auraltechnology™?

And all this for an exclusive introductory offer price of \$749-95 (excluding installation and line rental).

We advise you to apply now, as we anticipate demand will be high.

*Free SatNav is not available on economy tariff.

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STEPHEN GALLAGHER: TELLING STORIES AND PLAYING LIKE A CHILD

Stephen Gallagher's extensive writing credits include plays for radio, TV screenplays, novels, and numerous short stories. He has written for TV series such as DOCTOR WHO, CHILLERS and BUGS. He has authored many novels, two of which, CHIMERA and OKTOBER, he adapted for TV. His short stories have appeared in several publications including WEIRD TALES, THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, FEAR and DARK VOICES. His first collection of short stories, OUT OF HIS MIND, received the British Fantasy Society Best Collection award in 2005.



He is currently working on a new novel, as well as writing a supernatural thriller for the BBC to be screened later in 2007. A second collection of short stories - including 10,000 words of new material as well as previously published stories - is also planned.

So, how did it all start? **Caroline Callaghan** finds out ...

I suppose I knew I wanted to be a storyteller from an early age. As soon as I'd finished a piece of reading that inspired me, the story would continue in my mind. I used to look forward to the half hour or so before I went to sleep, when I could close my eyes and stare at the ceiling and extend and reinvent scenarios from the book I'd just been reading.

And my reading at that time was incredibly wide. I had my library ticket from a very early age. They let me into the local junior library a couple of years early because I was so keen. Subsequently, I got my adult ticket early as well, because the librarians could see that I'd been through almost everything in the junior library.

I was reading works from previous generations; RM Ballantyne, Frank Richards - I remember being really inspired by all the Biggles books. And as I moved towards my teens, I moved onto Edgar Rice Burroughs. I loved the Tarzan novels. I loved science fiction. Anything that was guaranteed to set the imagination alight, I would devour it. I read hugely. All of that storytelling was regurgitated as either imaginative exercise or as play.

And so it came very naturally, I suppose, to start writing my own stories as soon as I could write, drawing my own comics as soon as I could draw, and inflicting these on friends, relatives, neighbours and so on. So, I did know from an early age that I wanted to write, but it wasn't a career ambition - it just came very, very naturally. And the beauty of it is that, in a way, I've been given permission to carry on what I've been doing since I was four or five years old.

A lot of your work has common themes - science gone wrong, cover-ups by big business (e.g.

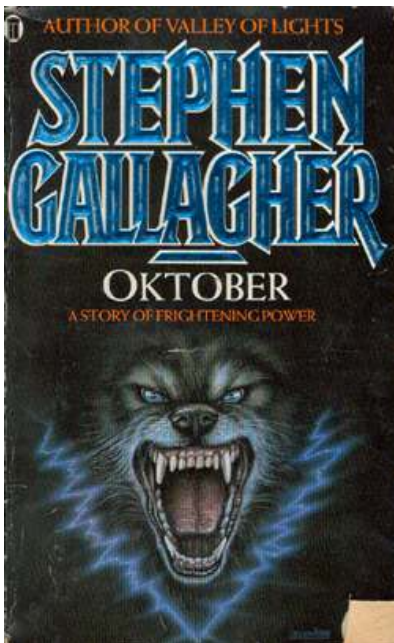
CHIMERA, OKTOBER, ELEVENTH HOUR). Are these themes which you feel particularly strongly about?

They're things I feel excited by. When I have an idea, I sometimes have to wait for it to fall into a form. And it often tends to fall into the same kinds of patterns. I try to avoid the knee-jerk 'big-business-as-evil-corporation' type of villain, simply because it can be too easy a thing to reach for. You've got to have a good reason, and a good issue, to construct your evil corporation around. I am more interested in the motivations of the individuals within the evil corporation, and the things that drive them.

Having said that, a corporation is a kind of entity that bears no responsibility, and yet has a personality and a presence of will, and that, I think, actually crosses a line from reality into fantasy. It's as if a big corporation is a fantasy creation that exists in the real world. It's a virtual villain, in a way. And I'm interested in the way these virtual villains are created and serviced, and the effect that they have on the rest of us. It's one way of doing what can be a totally realistic story on the surface, but still have the power of myth underpinning it. You may not have mythical monsters in the real world, but you do have these giant multinational companies who can do as much damage, and move with as much remorseless disregard for individual human life, as any mythical monster.

On TV, you've been involved in writing for many classic series, including DOCTOR WHO, CHILLERS, and BUGS, along with dramas based on your own books, CHIMERA and OKTOBER. Which do you feel most proud of?

That would be hard to say. The ones that I like doing most, and strive to do more of, are the entirely original pieces. But, perversely, sometimes the ones that give you the most satisfaction in retrospect are the ones you didn't have such a huge stake in. With your own work, the shortfall between what you wanted to do, and what you eventually did, can sometimes leave you with a sense of disappointment. But the feeling that you reached somebody else's targets, and wrote to their specifications, and fulfilled and exceeded them - that can be really satisfying.



The most complete thing I ever worked on was OKTOBER, because I wrote the book, wrote the screenplay, and directed the screenplay. And yet I look back on OKTOBER and think how much better it could have been if I'd approached it knowing what I know now. If you look at something like my MURDER ROOMS episode, or my ROSEMARY AND THYME stories, I went into those without huge ambitions and expectations. I was asked to do them. I looked at the specifications laid down by other parties, worked to them, and, at the end of the day, I was really satisfied with what I did.

I loved the MURDER ROOMS idea, and although it's completely out of my register, I loved the ROSEMARY AND THYME shows as well. They worked really well, and I'm really happy with them. I got to do exactly what I wanted, and they shot every single word that I wrote. As long as I found the voice of the show, and hit certain buttons that the producer wanted me to hit, I had the freedom to do anything. That was hugely liberating.

So, it's a two part answer to your question, and it's a perverse one. The things that I'm least satisfied with are the things that I most want to do, and those that I'm most satisfied with are the pleasant sideline things that I never sought out. They were

done either as earners, or as favours to producers, or simply because the opportunity came up. It's not a recipe for happiness, I've got to say. The recipe for happiness is to have huge ambitions, fulfil them entirely, and look back with immense satisfaction, and I've come to the conclusion I'm fated never to be in that position.

Talking of ROSEMARY AND THYME, the Christmas Special (The Cup of Silence) contained an affectionate tribute to obsessive classic horror movie fans. Are you an obsessive classic horror movie fan?

That episode was autobiographical. Stephen Laws, the horror writer, and I have been friends for years. We share similar, though not identical, tastes for old movies. He loves certain old movies that I see nothing in, and I love certain ones that he sees nothing in; and every now and again we overlap on some things like, for example, the old Hammer films and THE HAUNTING.

There's a place just outside London, right next door to Bray Studios, called Oakley Court, which in the 1960s was a very run-down old stately home. Because Hammer Studios had access to it, it was used a lot for locations. So, many of the low-budget British B movies, and some of the A movies, from the late-'50s, early-'60s, on into the TV series of the '70s, were shot in and around Oakley Court. It's a very familiar exterior. They used bits of the grounds. They used rooms inside.

I've shot in houses just like it. They're a gift for film-makers because they don't have a preservation order slapped on them, the owner doesn't care too much about what goes on in there because the place is in need of total renovation anyway, and you can drill holes, put wires through, string lights up, that kind of thing.

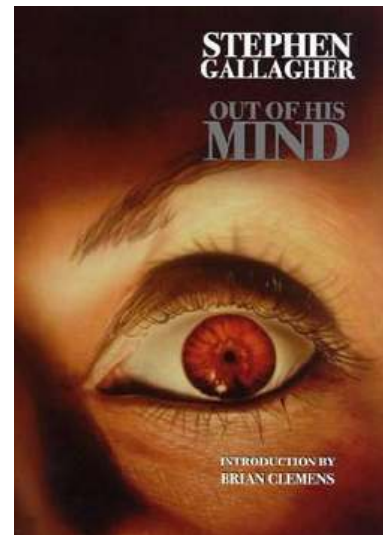
That's what Oakley Court was used for in those days. It's now a four or five star luxury hotel, doing weddings, gourmet weekends, and so on. And Laws and I were talking for years about spending a long weekend there; going and revisiting a few of the locales where some of our favourite movies were shot.

Gallagher goes on to explain how he sprung a birthday surprise on Laws which involved the writers and their partners spending a weekend at the hotel ...

I'd taken a little movie camera with me, and we were the two guys in that ROSEMARY AND THYME episode; going round and walking through some of the scenes, and playing like a couple of seven year olds. We had a great time. And a couple of years later, we did it again at Ettington Park, near Stratford-upon-Avon, where the exteriors for THE HAUNTING were filmed. So when I came to write *The Cup of Silence*, I just drew on that. Everything we'd done, and all the fun that we'd had, just went straight into the script. That's my life on screen.

Now for a hypothetical question. If you could interview anyone, living or dead, from any era, in literature, film or TV, who would it be, and what one question would you like to ask them?

That's a tough one. The person who springs to mind is HG Wells, because I'd like to compliment him for all but laying the groundwork for the century we live in. Certainly in the field in which I work, Wells' influence is here, there and everywhere. If not him, maybe Arthur Conan Doyle, because, again, he laid out so much of the template for storytelling as it's been inherited by us now. Those two - and all the other great, late



Victorians - we reiterate their story forms so much.

As to what single question I'd like to ask, I don't know. What I'd really like to do is get them in a corner with a couple of drinks, and spend the evening chatting. Because one of the things that has been a feature of my life, from the time I started working in this field, has been the social side with people who are passionately committed to the genre. And I'd like to think that I could introduce Conan Doyle or HG Wells to a sense of modern fandom.

Mind you, I would imagine Conan Doyle would probably feel overwhelmed by it, when you consider the number of Sherlock Holmes societies that there are. He wasn't a great lover of Sherlock Holmes anyway - he quickly tired of his own creation - so I would imagine that he wouldn't be up for it. But Wells probably would be, because it would be a chance for him to meet more women. So I suppose the question to him, thinking about his success with women, would be, 'Herbert, how do you do it?'

And finally, what's the role of research in your writing?

Along with making the stories real, it gets you out of the office. The part of being a writer that I don't like is the bum-on-seat writing. After a few weeks of that I'm itching to get out into the wide world. And one of the nicest things about this job is if you approach people who do certain kinds of jobs, or if you approach institutions for things that you need to know, they will open up to you, because they realise that you've got a seriousness of purpose.

It's like being a BLUE PETER presenter - you never know what you're going to be facing next week. I've done things like riding with the police in Phoenix, Arizona (*for his 1987 novel, VALLEY OF LIGHTS*). A few months back, I was in the Fleetwood Marine Training Centre on a firefighting course. That was great fun, and that will make its way into a story one day. Another time at the same place, I went along to the helicopter escape routine, which spawned the short story THE BOX. I would never have got that story had I not had that experience.

Basically, it's all play. The whole storytelling thing, going back to your first question, is an extension of childhood play. And it's great at my age to still be playing like a seven year old. When that wears off, then I'll stop.

You can find out more about Stephen Gallagher's work at his website www.stephengallagher.com

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REFLECTION

By JOE COTTLE

Poor Corey Jordan's work life is hell. Soon his personal life will be, too.

It had been a shitter of a day, but Corey Jordan was glad to be home. There was no way, in his considered opinion, in which the day could get much worse. Fuck Duncan Leman anyway – if he didn't want to get a smack in the mouth a week before Christmas, then it was his own stupid fault for constantly picking on the non-Brits at work. Racist bastard! About time someone tore a piece off the old fool. And Corey was more than happy to be that person.

Of course, as it turned out, the boss didn't agree. And, for reasons Corey couldn't quite work out, it was he who ended up with the first written warning. Was it his fault that racism pissed him off so? No. Was it his fault then, when that pissed off, his mouth ran away with itself and produced more profanities than Corey even realised he knew? No, it was not. Apparently accusing someone of being racist was as bad as being racist nowadays. And it wasn't like Duncan didn't deserve the smack. What a fucked up world they lived in!

And so, leaving work early (and not out of choice!), he decided to pop into the pub. Six bottles of Bud, two shots of JD, and four hours later he finally realised it was time to head home. So, here he was, stumbling through his door at seven thirty on a Monday night, completely stone sober. Whoever said he couldn't handle his drink was clearly talking crap.

'Shhh!' he hissed at the table as it wobbled next to him. 'Stupid table! What you doing in the way?' he asked, in a stage whisper.

He looked up at the dark hallway. Why he was whispering he had no idea. Not like anyone else lived in his house, was it? He laughed. He really did need to stop thinking to himself like he was two people. As he opened the door to the living room he wondered if thinking to yourself was the first sign of madness. It's what they said...

He shook his head. Nope, *talking* to yourself was, he belatedly remembered. 'So where does that leave talking to tables?' he asked the door, and entered the room.

He stopped. There was someone standing in the middle of the room, silhouetted against the lights coming from the streets outside. Corey took a deep breath, his mind clouded and confused. He knew he ought to do something, say something, but all he could do was watch as the person slowly turned their head. A light swept passed the large windows looking out onto the street, and for a split second Corey got a glimpse of the person's eyes.

White! Pure white. No pupil, no iris, just pure white eyes!

Without even realising he was doing it, Corey's hand reached for the light switch and flicked it. The light flooded the room, and for a second Corey was blinded. He blinked, forcing his eyes to adjust to the illumination.

'What the fuck?' he said, breathing heavily.

Other than himself there was no one in the room. He looked around, wondering if the person has dashed into the kitchen via the small arch while he was blinking, but no. The kitchen was empty, too. Corey shook his head.

Okay, so maybe he was a *little* bit drunk after all.

Corey pushed himself back from the monitor, and rubbed his temples. Damn hangover. He looked around quickly; making sure no one noticed his rubbing. He didn't get drunk; at least that's

what he liked to tell his colleagues, so the idea of appearing to be hung-over was not exactly conducive to his manufactured image.

He reached into the drawer of his desk, and surreptitiously removed the small silver box. Wrapping his hand around it, ensuring that no one else could see what he was holding, Corey got to his feet and made his way across the open plan office.

Open plan. The scourge of privacy at work. He hated it. Hell, he hated working in a call centre period, but he was kind of stuck with it. The unwanted image of the written warning came to his mind, and he smiled slyly to himself. Well, he was just about stuck with it. Maybe after the New Year he'd start looking for something else, but right now he had to hold on to his job. Which meant trying to steer clear of Duncan Leman.

The bastard!

Once he was in the staff toilets, Corey checked to make sure he was alone, then turned to the sink. He turned on the tap and opened his hand, revealing the packet of paracetamol. He popped a couple out of their foil, and placed them on his tongue, bending over the sink to drink directly from the tap. Not as elegant as a cup, but then the water in the bathroom was not normally used for washing down hangover pills. Standing up straight again, he tilted his back. He swallowed, and let out a breath of air.

It'd take a little while, but his headache would soon subside to a manageable level. In the meantime he just had to make sure he didn't lean in too close to the...

'Drowning your sorrows last night, then, eh, Cor?'

He closed his eyes. He bloody hated it when that tit used the diminutive; it implied a familiarity that wasn't warranted. Slowly, Corey opened his eyes again and turned to face the intruder. 'What do you want, *Dunc*?' he asked, placing particular emphasis on the last word. He knew Duncan was no fan of being called that – besides, it made the owner of the name sound incredibly thick. And Corey liked that.

Duncan Leman was a short man, somewhat overweight and not very tidy. One of the sort who figured that since they spent their working hours hidden behind a PC and phone there was no need to worry about their appearance. It was the middle of winter and the fool was dressed in khaki shorts and a sickingly bright t-shirt. Corey wanted to hit him just for dressing like that.

Duncan shrugged. 'Don't want anything, mate. Just making an observation is all.'

'Yeah, well don't. I didn't ask for your opinion.'

Again Duncan shrugged. 'Mate, we're all entitled to our opinions.'

Corey chewed his bottom lip and shook his head. 'No, really. It's just the fact that you think I'm entitled to your opinion that grates on me.' He nodded at the door behind Duncan. 'Sod off.'

As expected, Duncan didn't take the advice, which suited Corey well. The headache had yet to leave, and Duncan's continued presence was only serving to irritate it. He turned away from Duncan and looked at his reflection in the mirror. Corey pocketed the tablets and turned the tap back on.

'Why are you always so aggressive, Cor?'

Corey couldn't believe the stupidity of the man. 'Shit, dude! Do you actually have a brain in that head of yours?' he asked, as he splashed water over his face. 'I'm pretty sure I spelled it all out yesterday. I don't like you, Duncan.' He pulled a couple of paper towels out of the dispenser and proceeded to dry his face. 'You're pond scum. Now, fuck off, before I ask less politely.'

Duncan smiled and narrowed the gap between them. 'One step closer to the edge, Cor.'

Corey raised an eyebrow, continuing to watch Duncan in the mirror. He'd never have pegged Duncan as a Linkin' Park fan, nor as intelligent as he now seemed. He was clearly provoking Corey; intentionally, too. Duncan wanted Corey out of the job. Corey wondered why. He also decided not to rise to the bait.

‘Yeah, whatever, dude. I’ve got work to do.’ He went to move around Duncan, but the shorter man merely stepped in the way. Corey sighed. ‘Mate, sorry, but I ain’t getting no second warning for you.’

Duncan, at least, had the good sense to look disappointed. ‘Now that is a shame, ‘cause I know that unc... Mr Roberts wants your ass.’

Corey stepped back, and regarded Duncan in a new light. The slip was clear, and Duncan hasn’t been quick enough in covering it. The boss was his uncle, eh? So, it was a tag-team event. He decided to laugh it off. For now. ‘Yeah, well, if he wants a piece of ass he should try Heaven. I’m spoken for!’ With that he barged his way out passed Duncan.

Corey flicked the lamp off, and for a few moments stood by the archway that connected the living room to the kitchen. The soft orange glow of the fire created a calming atmosphere in the room, making Corey not want to move. He knew he had to, of course, since it was the early hours of the morning and he needed some sleep before work. But he felt chilled, and not the least bit tired. The soft flickering shadows on the walls, coupled with the slight inebriation, made him more relaxed than sleepy.

He walked across the room, and stopped before the mirror hanging above the mantle. He stepped closer, and remained there, watching his reflection and the way the fire below cast shadows across his face, giving him a much more definite bone structure than he usually had. He rubbed a hand across his jaw line, ending on his chin. Once again he wondered if he ought to go for a beard. Not a goatee; that was too expected these days. No, he wanted a full beard, but nicely trimmed... Jonathan Frakes style.

He turned his head slightly to the left, to check the shadow line across his jaw. He stopped, his eyes never reaching his jaw. Instead they rested on the figure. Once again it was there, silhouetted against the window. Corey swallowed hard. This time he was *not* drunk. He’d barely had two bottles of Budweiser.

Not daring to remove his eyes from the silhouette, Corey started to move to his right, to where the lamp stood.

‘Don’t turn the light on.’

Corey froze. For a moment he forgot to breathe. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Not that he knew what he was going to say. Forming thoughts was hard enough.

‘Turn the light on, and I’ll be gone.’

Nonetheless Corey felt his fingers reaching out towards the lamp. He knew he wasn’t close enough to reach the lamp, but his fingers seemed to think otherwise. It was as if some primal instinct was forcing his hand to move, to take away the darkness.

‘Listen to me, Corey Jordan. It’s time to put an end to the pressure.’

Somehow he managed to find his voice. ‘Pressure?’

‘Yes. Duncan Leman.’

Once again Corey swallowed hard. His throat was incredibly dry. Which made little sense, since he’d only recently polished off a bottle of liquid. The way the Silhouette said that name. It sounded very familiar. Somehow, although Corey couldn’t quite get his mind around how, he knew he should recognise the voice. ‘Who... who are you?’ he asked lamely.

‘That, I cannot answer.’

For the first time Corey noticed that the Silhouette had its head turned away from him. Which was nice, Corey considered, since those opaque eyes scared the crap out of him. ‘Why not?’

‘It is unimportant.’

The answer was simple enough, but Corey wanted to object to the finality of it. Somehow, this person was in his house. Once more standing in the middle of the room, lit by the lights outside

the window. And there was no way he could have got inside. Corey made a point of locking the front door behind him when he returned home, and considering the weather lately, Corey had not opened any window or the back door in days. And then there was the previous night...

Drunk he might have been, but Corey was certain he had seen the Silhouette. Certain that the person has vanished once the light came on. Of course, he'd convinced himself it was his drunken imagination... but now, here in his living room, he realised that deep down he had been *certain* all the time. 'Turn the light on and I will be gone,' the thing had said. And it was a thing, of that Corey was in no doubt. Whatever was standing in his living room, it wasn't human. It simply clothed itself in the silhouette of one.

'Go to St. Andrew's Square.'

The voice brought Corey back. St. Andrew's Square? He knew it. It wasn't too far from where he worked. He opened his mouth to ask why.

'Don't ask, Corey Jordan. Go there. 22a. St. Andrew's square. The door will be open, enter the house, and in the basement you will find Duncan Leman.'

'It's his house?' Even before the Silhouette nodded its head, Corey knew the answer. He felt an odd sense of excitement suddenly, as if he'd taken a direct hit of adrenalin. 'What do you want me to do there?'

'Just go there, Corey Jordan. You will know.'

Corey nodded his head slowly, and with his next words he knew he'd made a promise that could not be broken. No matter the consequences. 'Okay.'

St. Andrew's Square was one of those old quadrants that Corey usually loved to visit. Located in South Kensington it was rather typical of what he'd come to expect in London. A small garden in the centre, cordoned off with black railings, and surrounded by Victorian houses with three stories. What he loved so much, was the fact that around the corner was a built up area, very cosmopolitan. A complete contrast to the quadrant he was standing in. Only London seemed to carry off the mix of old and new with such grace.

This time, though, there was nothing about love behind his reason for being there. This time it was simple need. He had to find out what the Silhouette was talking about, and more... he *needed* to do this. He didn't know why, but something was compelling him.

He walked around the quadrant until he came to twenty-two. Three stories up, and down below... '22a' was engraved on the wall beside the door at the bottom of the stone steps. He noticed that the door, as the Silhouette had promised, was indeed open. Only a fraction, but enough for someone looking closely to notice.

Corey looked up and down the street, just to make sure he wasn't being observed. It was almost five in the morning, and all those with common sense were tucked away in bed, happily enjoying their trips to Nod. Gripping the collar of his coat tightly about his neck, Corey descended the steps carefully.

Once he reached the bottom he stopped. He glanced up the way he had come, worry plaguing his mind. He was almost certain he was being watched, yet he could see no sign of anyone. Trying to ignore the cold feeling running down his back, he gently pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold into the basement flat that belonged to Duncan Leman.

He found himself in a long corridor, which reminded him of his Gran's old place from when he was a kid. The grossest wallpaper he'd ever seen lined the walls, made up of distorted squares in the most lurid shades of green and yellow. The carpet itself clashed hideously with the walls, being a dark burgundy colour. Corey found himself shuddering, and this time not because of his unease, but rather through repulsion at the décor.

The door at the far end of the hallway was open, and he could see the kitchen beyond. Much like the hallway, it seemed to be from another age. He knew he was in a Victorian house, but he'd expected a bit of modern stuff inside. Mind you, he reflected, considering who lived here...

There were a further two doors along the left side of the hallway, both of which were slightly ajar. Cautiously, Corey crept along the passageway and approached the nearest door. As luck would have it, looking through the crack in the door, Corey saw that it was Duncan's bedroom. And the bed was occupied.

Corey pushed at the door, hoping that it would not creak. It didn't. He stepped into the bedroom and drew closer to the bed. The duvet covers a rather lumpy form, which he guessed was Duncan. But as soon as his eyes alighted on the smaller shape on the other side of the bed, Corey came to a stop. A worrying thought crossed his mind.

The second shape under the duvet was almost half the size of the former – or, rather, Duncan. Corey frowned and continued to creep around the bed. When he was close enough to get a good view of the upper half of the second shape, Corey saw a child's head poking out of the duvet.

He pulled back, aghast. The worst thoughts ran through his mind. Sure, it could just be a kid relative that Duncan was looking after... but surely in such an event either the kid would be sleeping on the couch or Duncan would have been. But not in bed together... at the same time!

Corey swallowed. He heard a sound behind him and turned.

Behind was the window, and before that window... Corey was unsurprised to see the Silhouette. He wanted to speak, to ask something, but he didn't wish to disturb the sleeping forms until he knew for sure.

The Silhouette nodded. For a moment Corey wondered what it was nodding at, then he realised. It was an answer to his unspoken question.

His heart hardening, Corey turned to face the bed.

He had no idea how he was going to handle this, but he knew he had to do something. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words came from the Silhouette. The words sent a shiver down him. Not because of what was said, but because of the voice. He had heard it before, of course, but now he knew whose voice it was.

His own.

'This ends now, Duncan Leman.'

Corey heard the movement behind him, but he did not dare to look. Just the knowledge that the Silhouette had his voice was enough – to actually see himself was not something Corey was ready for. But the choice was soon taken out of his hands. The Silhouette came into his line of sight. First as a dark shape on the periphery of his vision and then before him, as it neared the bed.

Corey felt his breath being stolen away from him. He stood there, immobile. Able only to watch. As the Silhouette approached the bed, the shadow fell off it – *him*, Corey figured was the best way to describe the figure, since it was, undoubtedly, a man. And worse, a man he knew all too well. As the shadow fell, dripping away like watered-down oil, Corey took in the appearance of his doppelganger. There was something almost clinical about the suit he wore. It was a dull grey affair, straight slacks, and a body hugging top, with a short but tight looking collar. Corey swallowed when he got his first full look at his double's face. If he had passed the man in the street, Corey was sure he'd probably have never noticed the similarity, since the Silhouette's face was a lot harsher than his own. It was his face, but at the same time it wasn't. The full Frakes style beard only helped to highlight the differences. Sunken eye sockets, containing the orbs of pure white that he had seen before, and a nose that had clearly been broken on several occasions.

His observation of his distorted self was interrupted by movement from the bed. His head snapped around, in time to see Duncan struggle into a sitting position. As soon as Duncan's eyes alighted on the Silhouette his mouth fell open. Amidst the fear, Corey also saw recognition in Duncan's eyes.

'No, you're not dreaming this time, Duncan Leman.'

Duncan moved his mouth to speak, but no words came. In a way, Corey found that oddly reassuring, knowing that it wasn't only him who had trouble getting words out in the presence of his doppelganger.

'You knew this time would come,' the Silhouette continued. 'The scales of justice are tilting, and not in your favour, Duncan Leman.'

Corey looked over at his double again. He was puzzled as to why his twin continued to call Duncan by his full name. There was something undeniably sinister about it. For the first time in ages, a laugh erupted from his mouth, which caused the Silhouette to look at him. Corey resisted the urge to flinch, but once more the nervous laugh came out. The Silhouette frowned.

'You have no need to fear me, Corey Jordan. Only he does,' he said in a cold voice, gesturing to Duncan with one hand which, Corey noticed, was deeply scarred.

'But,' Corey began, with a deep swallow, 'you're...'

'You?' The Silhouette nodded his head slowly. 'Yes. As one of our favourite writers might have said, I am you, seen through a mirror darkly.'

As explanations went that was of no help to Corey at all. He shook his head. 'I don't understand.'

'Understanding later. Action now.' The Silhouette resumed his attention on Duncan, who was still sitting in his bed, silently watching the exchange between the two Coreys. The child beside had yet to stir. A small mercy Corey was thankful for. 'Stand up, Duncan Leman. Face your fate with dignity.'

Duncan looked around wildly, and shook his head. Finally he found his voice, but when it came it was pitiful. 'No,' he said barely in a whisper.

The Silhouette raised a hand, and pointed a finger at Duncan. 'You, who think you have such strength with a child, will now show me that strength. Stand.'

Corey watched as, clearly despite himself, Duncan removed himself from the bed, revealing his nakedness to Corey. It wasn't the actual sight of his lumpy naked body that repulsed Corey, so much as the thought that that nakedness was once embracing the child still sleeping in the bed.

'Yes, Corey Jordan. Such righteous rage is needed.'

Something stirred in the darkest corner of the room. Corey glanced over, and a black shape, a shadow, emerged from the corner, moving close to him. Without meaning to, he opened his hand and the shadow drifted onto his palm. His fist tightened around something hard. Corey looked down, and saw the black club he was holding.

'No, no,' Duncan said, sniffing away like a scared child.

Corey stepped forward, fully aware of what he had to do. Scum like Duncan Leman were not allowed to continue. Stealing the innocence from a child in such a grotesque way had to be paid for. Duncan staggered back against the wall, his whole body shaking.

'And now your dream comes true, Duncan Leman,' the Silhouette said.

'Please no. I'm sorry. I didn't...'

'Don't you dare, Dunc! I always knew you were scum,' Corey said, raising the club in the air. 'I just never realised how much.' And, with a sadistic pleasure he never knew he could possess, Corey proceeded to strike Duncan with the club. Again and again and again...

It was sometime later when Corey stopped, his rage having drained away. He looked at the pulpy mess that had once been Duncan Leman, and he stepped back, the club falling out of his hand. He felt satisfied, yet at the same time disgusted with himself. He knew that, without a doubt, the world was a better place without people like Duncan, but he still felt sickened by the violence he was able to dish out.

He turned to the Silhouette. Explanations later, he had said. Well, it was later, and Corey was sure he deserved some answers now.

The Silhouette was gone. Corey looked around the room frantically, and as his eyes came to rest on the bed they widened in horror. There was no one else in the bed, and no sign that there ever had been. His throat went dry.

He rubbed his fingers together, feeling the warmth between them. He glanced down, and noticed the dark red substance that covered his hand. Blood. The exact same blood that covered the corpse on the floor before him.

'Oh god,' Corey breathed, as realisation dawned.

THE ARTEFACT

By Matthew S. Carroll

Gillis finds a precious artefact in a yard sale, of all places, and decides he must take it home no matter what the cost.

Gillis spotted the artefact in a box of yard sale tools that was marked with a misspelled, hand-scrawled sign that read: \$2 a piece. Buried under a pile of grimy screwdrivers and wrenches, he didn't at first recognise its significance. He was just curious about the dirty lump at the bottom of the pile.

With roughened fingers, Gillis picked it up and curiosity turned to awe. His hands began to tremble. It's impossible, he thought. Not here, not in this box of junk, not in a two-bit yard sale. He gripped the artefact so hard its metal edges dug into his hand. He leaned against a table to rest his suddenly weak knees. He was a lean man with thinning hair and the dark brown forearms of a man who spends hours in the sun every day.

Someplace far off, the shrill scream of a child suddenly pierced the sticky summer air. He needed to think but his mind wouldn't stop spinning. It was difficult to concentrate with that kid howling. He barely noticed the other yard sale shoppers puzzling over chipped coffee mugs, unicorn knickknacks, and well-thumbed paperback novels.

He glanced furtively at the iron artefact that filled his hand. As an archaeologist with more than two decades of experience in Middle East digs, he had identified the god immediately. It was Nergal, an Assyrian god. As Gillis remembered it, Nergal was particularly violent and vengeful; he was the god of mass destruction and plague. At one point Nergal had stormed the underworld with a pack of demons.

If the artefact was genuine – and Gillis's gut told him it was – then it was more than 3,000 years old. How it had ended up in some dismal yard sale was impossible to guess.

Its worth was incalculable, based on its artistry and excellent condition. Clearly, its maker had been a master craftsman; Gillis could see the tiniest wrinkles in the god's face. It couldn't be called pretty. A crouching, toad-like figure with a horned face leered up at him. Stubby, bat-like wings flared out of the god's back and its claws were extended, ready for the kill. The creature's unnaturally long tongue gave it a lewd, disgusting appearance. All in all, the creature was ... frightening.

He paused, considering the artefact. Frightening? Did he really feel frightened? Could that be right? Yes. Yes, it was true, the tiniest shard of fear pulsed in his mind. Yet why should he feel scared? The artefact was a hunk of metal. What was there to be terrified about? In all his years of digs at the temples of ancient gods he had never before felt even a tremor of emotion at the discovery of an artefact, other than exultation. Finally he pushed the vague, formless fear from his mind. As a trained scientist, he didn't do emotion particularly well.

He peered closely at the back of the artefact. Someone in the not-so-distant past had soldered some pieces of metal with a heavy screw to the back of the figure. Why, he had no idea.

Gillis looked for the lady running the yard sale. There she was, old and sitting with the battered cash box at the end of the driveway. A widow, he figured. She looked a mess in a bathrobe and pink furry slippers, even though it was nearly noon. Her white hair was twisted into a mop-like disaster.

Gillis gripped his hands to stop the trembling. His next step should be to tell the widow what he had found. It was rightfully hers. For her benefit, the artefact should be auctioned off to the highest bidding museum. The money would set her up in luxury for the rest of her life. But he didn't

want to do it. He desperately wanted the artefact for himself. It was easily among the top five items he had handled in his professional career. Unfortunately for him, the ethics of the situation were perfectly clear. There was no grey area; it was a black and white, open and shut case.

With a sudden muffled sob, he shut his eyes tight. If the artefact were sold, he'd never see it again. Never touch it again. Never. His hand tightened convulsively. How could he simply hand it over to someone else? That wasn't right. Why should he give up something that he - and only he - had seen for what it was? Everyone else had overlooked it, everyone. It was his discovery! No one else's. He *deserved* to keep the artefact. He really did.

He blinked owlishly, struck by a sudden inspiration. What if he simply purchased the artefact from the old lady in a straightforward, honest transaction? Sure. That would work. A sly smile crossed his lips. Of course, it wasn't his problem if she didn't see that the artefact was valuable enough to be the centrepiece of a small museum. Who could blame him if the old woman was stupid? Once he bought it, she'd never miss it. The old bat had owned the god for years, maybe decades, and didn't have a clue. Maybe she had even bought it at a yard sale herself.

How could he buy it without the widow asking awkward questions? He didn't want to lie; that would be going too far. He rubbed his forehead, trying to calm himself. Perhaps he could buy the entire box of tools. She'd be less likely to notice the god mixed in with the other junk. He nodded. Yes, that should work. He stuck the artefact in the bottom of the box and covered it with greasy pliers and bent screwdrivers.

'Twenty bucks,' he said brightly to the old woman, who sat wearily in the folding chair. 'I'll give you \$20 for the whole box.'

'What do we have here?' she muttered, pushing white hair off her forehead. She peered up at him, her blue eyes half covered with a dim white shadow. The woman has cataracts, Gillis realized with a jolt. She's going blind and won't be able to see the artefact, never mind see it for what it is. His spirits soared; he knew he'd get away clean. He barely felt a twinge of guilt at taking advantage of an old, half-blind lady. This, from the man who normally was reluctant to pick up a dollar in the street because he knew it wasn't his.

She tugged at the box, which he held waist-high. He found he couldn't let the box out of his hands. Reluctantly, he lowered it so she could see what was inside.

'Tools, is it?' she croaked, with the hoarse voice of a lifelong, pack-a-day smoker. 'My husband puttered around forever down the cellar, doing nothing for hours except playing with his tools. Thirty bucks and it's yours. Bunch of junk.'

'All right, thirty, then,' said Gillis, as lightly as he could. Screw a counter offer. He wanted to escape to the safety of his car as quickly as he could. He was forced to put the box down on the card table in front of the woman while he pulled his wallet from his pants. The damn fool kid still wailed; couldn't someone shut him up?

'Nothing else in there, is there? Nothing special?' The woman poked a hand slowly through the tools. Her long fingers crawled over the tools like the trembling legs of a monster white spider.

The cold sweat of fear crawled down his neck. Please, oh please, don't find the artefact, he thought. He held the three \$10 bills toward her with suddenly limp fingers. Jealous and afraid he would lose the artefact, he dropped the bills on the card table and jerked the box away from her lingering fingers.

Startled, she blinked at him with half-blind eyes. 'Wouldn't try to cheat an old widowed lady, would you, dearie?' she said. Her head shook slightly with a tremor that never quite stopped. She must have one of those old-folk diseases whose name he could never remember.

'Trying to sell everything off,' she said. The woman smelled awful. It must've been weeks since her last bath. Dark lines of dirt traced the wrinkles of skin along her neck. 'My husband's been dead for ten long years. Too hard to keep up the house, dearie. Going to the home. The home. I need every penny I can get.'

'I have to go,' he said. Appalled at her odour, he leaned away from the woman as much as he could without being openly rude. He turned to leave when her fingers darted out and gripped his wrist with surprising strength. Somewhere in the distance, the cry of the child had dwindled to a stifled sobbing.

'I thought at first you might be the thieving type. You get those, even at yard sales run by an old lady, did you know that?' she whispered. He slowly twisted his arm, trying to escape. She pitched her voice so low no one else could hear. 'But I can tell now that you're not a thief. Not with that handsome face, those beautiful clothes. No. You're not the type. Are you, dearie?' Her lips parted, perhaps for a smile; he saw darkened, rotted teeth. Suddenly her tongue darted out - it was an unnaturally long tongue, coloured a mottled grey.

She looks like the artefact, he thought for one horrible, frozen moment. Then the tongue disappeared back behind into her mouth and she was only a slightly befuddled old woman with bad eyesight.

'No,' he whispered. 'I'm not a thief,' he said, unnerved at his own lie. But not enough to tell her the truth. She laughed hoarsely and released his arm after a final, dreadful caress. She dismissed him with a wave.

Free, he thought, turning toward blindly toward the road, toward his car, toward freedom. Sharp claws gripped his forearm. The pain was so bright and intense he gasped in shock and alarm and nearly dropped the box. Nearly. But he didn't.

'Stop right there,' hissed a voice. 'Where do you think you're going?'

He turned to the enraged face of his wife, June. With her other arm, his wife clutched a young boy of ten years old. A white towel stained with blood was wrapped around his head.

'Where have you been? My God, didn't you hear your son screaming? He fell against that wall and cut his head. He's going to need stitches.'

Afraid to respond - his wife became so enraged, she frightened him sometimes - he followed his wife to the car, still clutching the box. He'd tell her about the artefact later.

His son Johnny figured out what the artefact had been turned into. A day after the yard sale - a day after Johnny's six stitches - Gillis sat at the kitchen table with a small brush and a soft sponge, carefully cleaning the grime off the artefact.

The god's grotesque face shined under the overhead kitchen light. Gillis's careful cleaning had removed decades of grime. His admiration for the sculptor increased with every detail. The work went beyond craftsmanship; it was artistry of the highest order. Under a magnifying glass, the nails on the hand were perfect. Gillis marvelled that the artefact's tiny eyes seemed to follow him as he worked. The creature was less a casting than a living creature shrunk into pocket-sized image.

He was struck at how little damage the artefact had suffered. Even the best-preserved artefacts suffer nicks and scratches through the centuries; this was near perfect. How it had avoided getting dinged in that box of tools, he had no idea. It was a minor miracle.

'Are you going to put the guy on the front door?' asked Johnny.

'Put who on the front door?' asked Gillis absently. 'Hand me that brush, will you?'

'That doorknocker.'

'That ugly thing,' said his wife June, wrinkling her face. She shook her head and turned back to the newspaper. 'I'd throw it out. It's a scary hunk of junk. That's what I think.'

It's not junk. It's beautiful, thought Gillis. His wife was much tougher than he was. When they argued, he never won. It was easier to keep his mouth shut and try to do what he wanted, if he could get away with it. He pretended he hadn't heard her. 'Doorknocker?'

'That's what it is, isn't it?' said Johnny. The white bandage on his forehead bobbed as he nodded toward the artefact. 'I mean, the ugly little guy is the part you grab. It's the knocker part.'

Gillis picked up the artefact, struck by what he had overlooked. Sometimes it takes a non-professional to spot the obvious. 'Johnny, you are a genius,' he said slowly. At some point, an amateur welder had turned the god into a doorknocker by adding a few pieces of metal.

The idea of using the artefact as a doorknocker made Gillis think. He had planned to display the artefact in the spare room he had turned into a mini-museum. It would be the jewel of his collection. But now he was having second thoughts. The artefact would raise awkward ethical questions about how he had obtained such a high quality, important artefact. The problem was that the artefact was unprovenanced – there was no paperwork showing he had purchased it legally or to show it had legally left the country where it had been discovered. In his profession, dealing in unprovenanced artefacts was tantamount to working hand-in-hand with grave robbers. Worse, the government frowned on people who dealt with stolen artefacts. He could face criminal charges.

Using the artefact as a doorknocker was an ingenious solution. Other professionals who saw it displayed so casually would assume it was a well-crafted fake. After all, what kind of person would turn a valuable artefact into a doorknocker? No sane person, that's for sure.

Besides, the more he thought about it, the more he didn't like the idea of sticking it under glass. It would be so ... confining, he thought, with some confusion. He didn't really understand why he thought that. But placing it under glass definitely felt *wrong*. It would be like throwing it in prison.

'Johnny, let's try it,' Gillis said.

'Cool,' said Johnny.

'Oh please,' said June with a grimace. 'We'll terrify the mailman.' But she didn't say it with much vehemence, so Gillis took a chance and ignored her.

The front door had a cheap doorknocker. The holes in the door and the screw in the artefact matched up perfectly. It was an easy switch.

'There,' said Gillis, pleased, after installing the new knocker.

He lifted the artefact and dropped it against the door. It struck with a satisfyingly loud bang.

'It looks real nice, dad,' said Johnny.

The god leered at them. The dark tongue sticking out between its sharp incisors gave it a vaguely vampirish look.

'Should we paint it?' asked Johnny. 'Maybe in gold or silver? Make it look newer?'

No. The word formed in his mind before he had a chance to think. 'Maybe not,' he said. 'I don't think it really needs a layer of paint. Do you?'

Johnny shrugged. 'I don't know.' He considered the doorknocker closely. 'Dad? Do you really think it's a good idea to put that thing up? It's kind of freaky.'

'You're not getting flipped out like your mom, are you, Johnny? Don't be a baby. It's just a piece of metal. A well designed, beautiful piece of metal.'

The boy flushed. 'Do you think people will like it?' he asked.

Gillis grinned. 'We'll soon find out.'

It was a short wait. Their next-door neighbour gave the doorknocker three loud bangs that afternoon.

Gillis answered the door.

'Gillis, I brought back your lawnmower,' said Harold, a squat man with curly, unruly hair and dark-rimmed glasses that slipped down his nose. 'And what the hell is that?' said Harold, pointing at the new doorknocker.

'Just something I picked up a yard sale,' said Gillis carefully. 'Do you like it?'

‘Poor little guy looks constipated,’ said Harold, peering at the artefact’s contorted face. ‘Needs some prune juice to loosen him.’ He chuckled at his own joke, but Gillis didn’t laugh. Harold and Gillis were close buddies who kidded around all the time. They saw the joke in everything – sports, religion, family, themselves; but this time, Gillis didn’t even smile. He was angry, although he tried not to show it.

Frowning, Harold pushed his sliding glasses back up into place. Gillis knew Harold was wondering why he didn’t laugh at the joke.

He’s making fun of Nergal, Gillis thought. *That’s not right, not right at all. Nergal needs respect.*

After Harold had walked off, Gillis stared at the artefact for several long minutes. *It’s magnificent,* he thought. *I don’t think I’ve ever seen a work that was more beautiful.*

That night, Gillis had a strange, lifelike dream. He was a priest, clothed in sweeping white cloth. Clouds of incense in blues and yellows swirled around him. He stood in front of a massive marble temple that was clearly ancient. The stones in the columns and walls were chipped and darkened by a thousand years of winds and rain. He faced away from the temple, toward an open plaza ringed with fluted columns. A crowd of worshippers lay face down on the plaza’s flagstones, stretched out as far as he could see. All wore long robes of either blue or yellow, because those were the colours of his god, he knew. On either side of him, a dozen priests with shaved heads bowed and recited prayers in a language he couldn’t understand.

He raised his hands high over his head for silence. He needed to speak, needed to explain to the crowd the horrific rituals required to appease their mighty god, who was angry – no, furious! – at an unfaithful follower. All the worshippers waited in silence, some shivering in fear, their foreheads pressed tight against the ground. *Almost* all the worshippers. Somewhere in the back, someone laughed uncontrollably. Peal after peal of laughter rolled across the quivering backs of the worshippers.

How dare he, thought Gillis, outraged. The crowd began to murmur. Heads twisted to see who could be so sacrilegious. Gillis climbed down from the altar and walked through the crowd. He walked past row after row of worshippers with shaved heads until he came to the rear. A curly haired man in a T-shirt and jeans laughed so hard he had to hold his belly.

It was his neighbour, Harold.

‘You!’ hissed Gillis. ‘You dare to laugh? Again? You are the reason we are here, to punish you.’

Harold stopped laughing. With the back of his hand, he wiped tears from his eyes.

‘Hey, get a grip, Gillis. Can’t you see what you’re worshipping? It’s a little metal guy. A *funny* looking metal guy. Give it up, will you? You guys are all Looney Toons.’

But Gillis shook with an anger so great his arms trembled.

Harold began to laugh even more, louder and louder, so hard that his head began to expand like a balloon, until it was as large as a skyscraper. The mouth opened wide, wider, and then split at the jaws. Both halves came straight at Gillis, opened wide and ready to swallow.

Gillis wasn’t frightened. His god had given him great powers. ‘Blasphemer!’ he shouted, pointing his finger at Harold. A stream of shockingly bright flames shot out of his hand and struck the two halves of Harold’s head. The flames ignited Harold’s face. He screamed for forgiveness, but it was too late.

‘What you done to me, Gillis?’ howled Harold. ‘You’ve killed me!’

‘I didn’t mean to, Harold,’ shouted a remorseful Gillis. ‘It was a mistake. The god made me do it.’ He ripped off his white robes and tried to extinguish the flames, but the robes caught fire too, and then so did Gillis, until he screamed as loudly as Harold...

He awoke with a start, soaked with sweat.

June, lying beside him, had just awoken too.

‘Do you hear that? It sounds like an ambulance,’ she said, moving to the window. ‘It’s stopped at Harold’s house.’

Gillis, overwhelmed, couldn’t attend Harold’s funeral. June told him about it later in hushed tones.

‘The family is still in shock,’ she said. ‘They still don’t know what happened. An autopsy turned up nothing. His wife said Harold awoke with a scream and then he rolled out of bed, dead. His face was contorted in a horrible way as if he had seen something so shocking, so frightening... The undertaker said Harold’s face was frozen in such a grimace there was nothing he could do. The coffin was closed at the wake.’

Gillis dreamed he was the priest every night afterwards. As before, he stood just outside the temple. Gillis would peer into the vast temple’s darkness. Inside, a few braziers of coal burned with a dull glow, but he could not see the living god, although he knew where it dwelt. It lived in the innermost chamber. He had a good idea of what the god might look like, anyway. It would be short and squat, with long talons and an obscenely long tongue...

Although Gillis could not see Nergal, the god whispered into his ear. The god wanted him to enter to temple and worship at its feet. If Gillis did, the god promised, Gillis would be granted as much power in real life as he could wield. He would be able to richly reward his friends and to horribly punish his enemies.

But Gillis didn’t want to see the face of the god and definitely didn’t want to worship it. He’d seen enough, had done enough. Look at what the god had led him to do - he’d lied to the old lady and family and he’d killed his best friend. He was through with the god. Something had snapped inside of Gillis; the desire that had led him to practically steal the artefact had been burned away. That same desire now made him feel sick. The thought of walking through the temple’s cold corridors to the foul den of the god terrified him.

When he dreamed now, he fought back in a near panic. Gillis tore off his robes and tried to escape when the god whispered in his ear. He ran through the crowd of worshippers lying prostrate on their stomachs. Some of the worshippers stood and pointed their fingers at him, shouting, ‘Blasphemer!’

‘No, not me, don’t blame me,’ he cried. He ran until he woke with a start and a cry. Every night it was the same. Gillis knew the god was growing increasingly angry. Gillis was terrified to learn what would happen when the god’s patience reached its end.

‘What is wrong with you?’ snapped a groggy June, lying beside him in bed one night. ‘You’ve woken me up for a week straight. You’re thrashing all over the place all of a sudden. You keep shouting out a name. Nergal. That’s the name of that stupid little statue you bought at the yard sale, isn’t it? I’ve had enough of that ugly little thing. It’s brought us nothing but bad luck, starting with Johnny’s cut. I’m getting rid of it tomorrow.’

He wanted to talk to her, but couldn’t. A low-grade fever he had battled for a few days had flared into something far more serious, sapping his strength.

The next morning, a silent Johnny and a haggard Gillis watched as June took a hammer and chisel to the statue. A few hard taps broke the weld that held the artefact to the doorknocker. It landed on the floor tiles with a sharp crack, lying on its back. Its fierce eyes burned straight at Gillis, its displeasure clear. Or so it seemed to Gillis in the depths of his fever. June picked up the artefact and marched to the trash barrel at the curb. She threw it on top and wiped her hands.

‘That’s that,’ she said triumphantly. ‘Old what’s-his-face is gone. The trash will be picked up and we’ll never see it again.’

Gillis stood mute. He had grown so terrified of the god's power that he had wanted June to smash and destroy the god, not just throw into the trash. But she couldn't understand what he was trying to say – his fever had intensified and he babbled incoherently. Gillis staggered off to bed.

He woke later that day, when the trash truck rumbled to a stop outside. He listened to the trash men's coarse jokes and heard the empty barrels drop with a hollow thump on to the sidewalk. It's gone, he thought dully, and drifted into a dreamless – if uneasy – sleep.

He awoke in the middle of the night when his wife left the bed. He hadn't been sleeping well; his pillow was stained yellow with his sweat. He heard her step on the creaky board in the hall as she walked towards Johnny's room.

There was a long silence. She's listening outside the boy's room, he thought. It was hard to concentrate; the fever made him nearly delirious. But he managed to stay alert.

The door to Johnny's room banged open. Gillis heard Johnny yell, 'No!'

'Give me the artefact, Johnny,' Gillis heard June say. 'I saw you search the trash. You didn't think I was looking, did you, Johnny? Well, I was. Don't you get it, Johnny? This thing is evil, *evil*. Don't you see what it's done to your father? Do you think that cut on your head was an accident? We need to destroy it.' She was practically hissing at the end.

His son sobbed loudly. Gillis wanted to get out of bed and comfort him, but his muscles had turned to water.

It seemed like a long time before his wife came back to the room. She walked in slowly, totally absorbed by something cupped in her hands.

He knew what she held. The artefact. He knew because her eyes held the same wild gleam his had, days before. It had claimed her, as it had claimed him.

'No, June, get rid of it,' muttered Gillis. Or maybe he dreamed he said it. He was so sick it was difficult to tell the difference.

His wife walked to the windows to draw the half open curtain. She paused, staring down at the street.

'There's an old woman down there,' June said tonelessly.

'A woman?' Gillis rasped. He tried to force himself from the bed. Once, twice; the third time he succeeded in making his shaking legs hold him up straight. He staggered to his wife's side.

An old woman with tousled white hair stared up at the window. Gillis knew her instantly - it was the old woman from the yard sale. The old woman didn't look so doddering and most certainly didn't appear half blind. Her eyes blazed straight at June. The old woman nodded once at June and then walked away quickly to disappear into the darkness, moving with far more grace than she had on the day of the yard sale.

'You were right,' said June. The old woman is right, too. The artefact is beautiful. I don't know how I was so blind.' She held it in her palm so it was bathed in the beams from the streetlight.

It looked obscene to Gillis now. 'The woman said?' he mumbled hoarsely. 'But you two never spoke ...'

His wife shrugged. 'We just talked, in a way. She told me a lot, standing there.'

'I have to lie down,' he said. 'Hospital. Have to get to the hospital. Need to call an ambulance.' He staggered to the bed. The fever was like a blast furnace. It made him dizzy and weak. He reached for the phone on the nightstand, but his wife was faster. She knocked his arm down. With a savage tug, she jerked the cord from the wall and threw the phone into a far corner.

His wife examined him with a cool, appraising look.

'The old lady was right about you and the boy,' she said. 'You're both weak. You failed the god and neither of you will last the night. Not like me. I'm strong. Tough. I deserve to be picked, just as the old woman said.'

'Picked?' he muttered.

'As the new priestess,' she said. 'Oh yes. The artefact has been passed to a new generation. Nergal is awakening. Slowly, yes, but he is awakening. It will take time - years definitely, decades possibly - but the god will return, in all his glory and might. His reign of blood and fire, of death and destruction, will begin again.'

'You're crazy,' he said. He breathed in short, ragged gasps. His time was close. His wife was disappearing into a grey haze as his vision deteriorated. Before he slipped into a coma, he thought he saw her smile. But maybe he imagined that, he thought, in his last cogent moments. Because he thought that he saw her tongue – unnaturally long and lizard-like – flicker out of her mouth. And he couldn't have seen that. Could he?

An extract from
SMOKE AND MIRRORS
Tanya Huff
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ONE

About a third of the way down the massive wooden staircase the older of the two tuxedo-clad men paused, head up, nostrils flaring as though he were testing a scent on the air. 'We're not... alone.'

'Well, there's at least another twenty invited guests,' his companion began lightly.

'Not what I meant.' Red-gold hair gleamed as he turned first one way then the other. 'There's something... *else*.'

'Something else?' the younger man repeated, suspiciously studying the portrait of the elderly gentleman in turn-of-the-century clothing hanging beside him. The portrait, contrary to expectations, continued to mind its own business.

'Something... evil.'

'Don't you think you're overreacting just a . . . ' The husky voice trailed off as he stared over the banister, down into the wide entrance hall. His fingers tightened on the polished wood of the railing as green eyes widened. 'Raymond, I think you'd better have a look at this.'

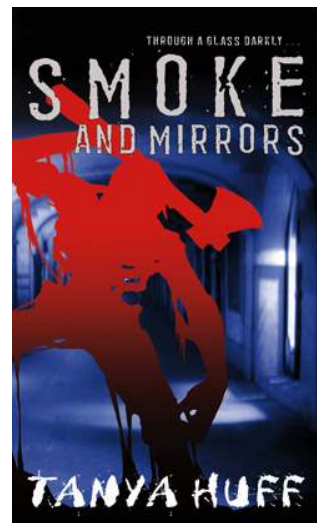
Raymond Dark turned – slowly – and snarled, the extended points of his canine teeth clearly visible.

'And cut!' Down by the front door, Peter Hudson pushed his headphones back around his neck, peered around the bank of monitors, and up at the stars of *Darkest Night*. 'Two things, gentlemen. First, Mason; what's with the pausing before the last word in every line?'

Mason Reed, aka Raymond Dark, vampire detective and currently syndicated television's sexiest representative of the bloodsucking undead, glared down at the director. 'I was attempting make banal dialogue sound profound.'

'Yeah? Nice try. Unfortunately, it sounded like you were doing a bad Shatner, which – while I'm in no way dissing the good Captain Kirk – is not quite the effect we want here. And Lee,' he continued without giving Mason a chance to argue, 'what's on your shoulder? Your right shoulder,' he added as Lee Nicholas aka James Taylor Grant tried to look at both shoulders at once. 'Actually, more the upper sleeve.'

A streak of white, about half an inch wide, ran from just under the shoulder seam diagonally four inches down the sleeve of Lee's tux. . .



to

LONDON CALLING, part two

By Trudi Topham

Part two in an ongoing Fantasy series. [Download Issue One](#) if you missed the beginning.

Baxter raced through the corridors, across open-plan offices with startled accountants, and up the five flights of stairs that lay between him and the guy it turned out he'd sent on a suicide mission.

How the hell was he going to explain this to Otto's mum? *Sorry, Mrs. Savage, your son got killed by some freaky guy who can draw on water to increase his body mass. No, there's no body. You can have this thin smear, but the government would like to keep the tile it's stuck to.*

Maybe not.

Every door he encountered he had to pause and press his security fob against the reader, causing him to lose more time. He was restricted from using his para abilities in the offices, so that just left him racing up the stairwell in an inhuman burst of speed, the cameras giving up on all attempts to track him.

He passed water fountains that were leaking, spare bottles piled up beside them whose caps had burst. The water was flowing toward the men's room as though it were completely natural for rivers of mineral water to flow over carpet on perfectly level flooring.

The bathroom was the only door he reached that didn't need a pass, and he shouldered his way in, drawing his gun.

Otto had no idea how he came to have his back against the ceiling. He vaguely recalled a fist the size of his mother rocketing towards him, and now that his vision was returning it made no real sense. Obviously he was hallucinating.

Down there were the sinks, the urinals, the cubicles. Most had been shattered by the force of the water that had been propelled through them. Or by that huge, snakelike creature whose massive claws were pinning him to the awful '80s artexing.

The dragon revealed gleaming white fangs of pearl. Its scales were a pale blue that shimmered in the failing neon lights. The huge body was coiled around and around, crammed into every nook and corner until there was little room for anything else, and still water was entering it, being absorbed by it, albeit only at a trickle now.

Otto grabbed at the paw that held him in place, suddenly realising that he might fall should the creature release him. 'Lee?' he asked, voice groggy. He couldn't remember the guy turning into a dragon, but just in case this wasn't all in his head it was best to check.

The head lifted, and Otto found himself being slammed against the thick security glass of the window. It barely budged, but the force of it drove the claws holding him into his back. He didn't feel it. Not really. He was vaguely aware of something uncomfortable going on in amongst all the smacking around he was receiving. It didn't occur to him to prioritise it.

The creature snarled, and began hammering the window with its other paw, until it couldn't take the onslaught and cracks shot across it like crazy paving. And still the window remained in place.

Otto couldn't help but laugh. There was something immensely funny about a big snakey dragony thing having trouble breaking glass. He couldn't figure out just what that was, but he knew it was worth a laugh. It was just a shame that with the laughter came specks of blood.

He lifted a hand from the paw holding him and ran it shakily across his lips, then stared at his fingertips. Bright red blood stared back at him, all bubbly and pretty.

I'm going to die.

He became vaguely aware of gunshots, then the bathroom was gone, and all around him was sky.

*

Baxter emptied a full clip into the creature. He was hardly a cultural savant, but he knew a Chinese dragon when he saw one. Well, this would be the *first* time he'd ever seen one, but that wasn't the point.

The point was it had broken the window and was flying out over the Thames with one of his people in its claws.

He nudged his earpiece. 'Neena. Big problem.'

'Yes, sir. We can see it.'

Baxter grimaced. How the hell were they going to keep this off the news? Let alone off fucking YouTube.

'Notify Strathclyde,' he grunted, swapping out his empty magazine for a fresh one and cocking the pistol. Then, for want of anything better to do, he stood amidst the broken glass and ceramic and fired yet more rounds at the thing.

The dragon was twisting through the air, spiralling down toward the Thames. Otto stared down at the choppy waters, and all he could think of was how much bigger his assailant was going to get if it started sucking up the river.

He grabbed hold of the paw around him, and slid his fingers around the scales, gripping on for dear life and closing his eyes.

Otto hated this. He hated physics. The Chinese agent could somehow convert water into body mass, but the only thing Otto had ever found that he could absorb to build his own bulk was the body of another living thing. It wasn't so bad when he could leech off trees if he had to grow, but taking the biomass from anything with a heartbeat gave him the willies.

Lee screeched as his tissue began breaking down, leaving him and flowing into the youth in his claws, and Otto pushed the tissue around, his body reconfiguring itself from the inside out, layer upon layer forming muscle and bone, skin becoming scales.

Two can play at this dragon shit.

Baxter held his fire, staring down at what was fast becoming the Irregulars' first ever PR nightmare. Otto had become this huge, white beast with leathery wings the size of the Houses of Parliament. Each downward propelled him and the other dragon high into the sky, only to have them plummet toward the water as they ran out of momentum.

Every time they skimmed the Thames, the enemy gained more bulk. Every time they rose, Otto leeches it off him.

'Neena. Is there *anything* you can do here?'

'No, sir.'

He grunted. 'Fucking fantastic. Okay. Tell SIS they can take pot shots, but see if they'll be nice enough not to hit our guy.'

'Done, sir.'

A hole punched into Otto's palm, blowing two off his fingers clean off, and obliterating the flesh on the back of his hand.

Lee laughed as a hole ripped its way through his neck. 'Your people seem to care not whether you live or die.'

Otto snarled, shoving more biomass around and repairing his hand, just as he could see Lee was doing to his neck. 'What the hell are you actually here for, titface?' He was doing his best to keep Lee away from the Thames, and he was slowly gaining mass over the other dragon, but this was making it harder for him to keep in the air. It seemed the other guy intrinsically had the power of flight, whereas yet again physics was working against Otto. Most of him was muscle now, just to power his wings.

Lee's response was gurgled as his lower jaw was torn clean away by another bullet, and Otto made a decision. He streamlined a paw and rammed it down Lee's throat, flesh flowing inside the other parahuman and reforming claws.

Lee had enough time to look surprised before Otto tore his head off.

There was little for Baxter to do but watch as the fifty calibre rifle rounds tore holes in both Otto and the enemy, until finally Otto did something and the smaller dragon fell apart, falling back toward the Thames as nothing more than a light squall.

Otto nosedived, wings almost flat against his back, before smacking into the water and vanishing beneath the surface. Baxter waited, but once the ripples had faded, there was no sight of his youngest team member.

He swore, then turned and holstered his weapon. He'd have to face the combined flak of SIS and his own boss at some time. May as well get it over with.

'And we would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused by the short lead-time given to the press for our little publicity stunt.' Strathclyde smiled warmly at the assembled journalists at the hastily-assembled press-conference. He's pretty much convinced anyone who was worth giving a shit about that he was telling the truth, and the rest he couldn't be bothered with. People who read *Bollocks Gossip Weekly* or whatever it was called would believe whatever they wanted to, irrespective of what was printed.

He stepped down from the podium and left his secretary to close the conference, moving through the curtains at the back of the hall and taking Baxter by the arm as he passed.

'You put me through that again, Baxter, and I'll have your arse.'

'Yes, sir,' Baxter replied stoically.

Strathclyde nodded and released Baxter's arm. 'I want Savage found. Was that his first kill?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He's only a kid. He's probably hiding out somewhere angsty about it. Get him in for a psych eval.'

Baxter nodded, and turned to go.

Strathclyde watched him leave, then tugged out his phone. 'Get D Section to run surveillance on I Section. I want Baxter's team tailed, and I want to know the moment they find Savage.'

To Be Continued...
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